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JOUGI SHIRAIISHI

ILLUSTRATION AZURE

WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina



VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

The young lady was a traveler.

She was also a witch.

The
Ashen Witch
ELAINA

A girl who earned
the title of “witch,” the
highest rank for a mage.
As a child, she read a book
that inspired her to go on
a journey of her own.



THE JOURNEY OF ELAINA

+ CHARACTERS

VIOLA

A self-professed archaeologist of beautiful girls. An excellent scholar who travels the world but whose personality leaves something to be desired.



ATOLIE

A mage from Sunken City. A girl full of youthful vigor who knows her manners.



YUURI

A mage who works for a certain spy organization. Currently putting in a lot of effort to become a hard-boiled woman.



AMNESIA

A girl who loses her memory in her sleep. Trying to reach the Holy City, Esto.



AVELIA

A top-ranking member of the Order of Holy Knights tasked with keeping the peace in the Holy City.



“What
is this,
sexual
harassment?
I dare you
to keep
this up.”

A broom carrying two girls soared over the spring plains.
It weakly bobbed from side to side as it was propelled forward.

“Mmph.”



WANDERING WITCH 4

The Journey of Elaina

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WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina

JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Illustration
AZURE

4


NEW YORK

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Translation by Nicole Wilder

Cover art by Azure

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CHAPTER 1

City of Oblivion

The place was a ruin, overgrown with large trees.

Remnants of buildings stood cracked, crumbled, and broken along the surface, their original purpose lost to time. The trees and moss had crept over them, beginning to stretch quietly toward the sky.

There was the sound of water.

The ground underfoot was flooded. With every step, the water gently rippled, causing the surface to crease.

Once inhabited by humans, this city was now nature's abode.

Currently, there were no signs of people except for *us*.

"Oof."

Once we had walked for a little while over the damp ground, I turned around abruptly inside what was left of a crumbled edifice and sat down. I set my broom down beside me.

That was when I noticed fireflies fluttering all around me.

"This is quite the place, wouldn't you say?"

She stretched her tired body. "I wonder how much farther we have to go to reach my hometown."

"...I wonder."

It could be one day, or two, or several months.

Her hometown was just that far away, its existence as hollow as a hazy mist.

"....."

She looked out over this place that had once been a city.

Her soft white hair swayed in the misty breeze. It must have felt nice. It looked like the corners of her mouth curled upward ever so slightly.

But her expression seemed lonely.

“...People used to live here, didn’t they?”

“Well, it is a ruin. You’re probably right.”

“I wonder what happened to them.”

“.....” The place looked ancient. “It had to have been over a hundred years ago at least—no, I guess even more time had to have passed for nature to heal, so I’m sure all the settlers are long dead.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Seriously. You’re such a downer.”

“.....” I guess she meant their distant relatives. How was I supposed to know that? “Maybe they had to abandon the place because of a war. Or perhaps they left for less violent reasons. There’s no way to know for sure. I wonder what happened.”

“...I hope they’re alive.”

She looked off into the distance, gazing at the ruins.

Her voice softened enough to disappear with the breeze. “How sad it is to be forgotten.” It was frail and uneasy.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that.”

When I answered her, she opened her eyes just a little bit wider and turned her face toward me.

I looked into her jade-green eyes. “This place is incredible. It’s the perfect location for a cool summer retreat.”

“.....”

“Even if there’s no one here right now, someone might live here again one day. It may even become famous as a sightseeing spot. For all we know, this place is a legendary hidden spot for someone else. So everything’s fine,” I told her. “As long as people visit this place and don’t forget about it, it won’t truly become a ruin.”

She lowered her eyes. “I’m going to forget it, though.”

She laughed as if she had given up.

“.....”

The girl's name was Amnesia.

Her clothing made her look like a knight of some chivalric order. Beneath her flowing white robe, the rest of her clothes were a formal white.

She wore a thick headband in her short white hair.

She'd had a mysterious curse placed on her that caused her to lose her memory every day. She couldn't even remember her own name.

“That's why you've got to get your memory back and remember it all,” I said to her.

“I will.” She nodded gently and replied, “So you shouldn't forget either, okay, Elaina?”

“Of course not. This isn't the kind of scenery I would forget any time soon...”

I looked up.

What I saw there were the ruins, which still stood strong even though they were decrepit, beautiful, and majestic. Despite everything, they had persisted.



CHAPTER 2

A Fictional Witch



A tough cookie like myself always began her day with a cup of coffee.

To those of us who dwelled in the shadows, making our living as spies, there was nothing better than waking up to a cup of java strong enough to properly banish sleep... At least, that was what's written in my hard-boiled spy novels, so it had to be true.

Pumping ourselves full of coffee and drugs was the way of the world-weary. I mixed a drop of the medicine into my coffee and drank it down. This was my daily routine.

I'd never been sure of what was in these drugs. I bought them from some mail-order catalog. But they were super expensive, so I was convinced they were beneficial to my health.

"Bleh...so bitter."

This strong flavor was actually what banished sleepiness. Probably. That wasn't written anywhere in the books, though. Coffee was really bitter and gross and seriously tasted like mud, which triggered my gag reflex and made drowsiness my second priority. It didn't taste anything like how they described it in the spy novels. In fact, they wrote that black coffee was delicious or something, but that had to be sarcasm or some sort of dark comedy. Get it? Because coffee is dark.

"...Ewwwwww..."

So after puking in the bathroom as usual, I headed for the office, looking cool. As I walked, I popped a (chocolate) cigarette in my mouth.

The very definition of hard-boiled.

My workplace was a spy organization that fronted as a coffee shop. It looked hip and intelligent up front, but in the back, we took care of the bloody business. Wasn't that just the very definition of case-hardened?

“Oh, Yuuri, you’re here. Let’s get down to business. I’ve got a job for you.”

The person who spoke to me was a grumpy old man. The boss of the organization.

Apparently, this man was the one who picked me up when I was abandoned as a child and raised me. I have no memory of this since it happened so long ago. I’ve forgotten all about my past because I’m so jaded by the world!

“Humph. And I suppose it’s something that’s worthy of my time?” I asked, tossing my hair. Even toward the boss, my attitude was hard-boiled.

“It’s a job only you can do—look at this.” The boss frowned and tossed a file onto my desk. “And when did you become enough of a big shot to talk to me like that?”

He scowled at me, hard.

Keeping my trembling fingers in check, I opened the file. The contents were a very simple matter. However, it was a directive that was simple and therefore complicated.

DIRECTIVE FOR THE ASSASSINATION OF THE FICTIONAL WITCH

Under the title were written the basic characteristics of the target and the date set for the assassination.

The target was a traveling witch who had arrived in this country several days earlier. This witch had a cute outward appearance, but her character was evil beyond all description. She was a fiend among fiends who deceived people without hesitation, thought only of accumulating wealth, and made free use of any and all fraudulent methods to swindle people—from innocent commoners to royalty. Damage reports had been coming in night and day from neighboring countries, and it sounded like it would be no exaggeration to say that if we were unable to bring her down here, she could destroy a small country.

An evil individual, to be sure, but the inconvenient part was that the target was a witch. Among the ranks of mages, it went novice, apprentice, then witch—the highest rank that only rare geniuses attained. Sixteen years had passed since I was born in this country, but I had yet to lay eyes on a real one. That was how rare they were.

But that particular witch was pure evil, and this time, she was the target I was supposed to bring down.

.....

“Seriously?”

“I wouldn’t put out this directive as a joke.”

“But...I’m just an ordinary mage...”

I forgot to tell you, but I was the lowest class of mage. You could say that if witches were like precious gemstones, I was like one of the little pebbles scattered around them.

“But this job is one that I can only entrust to you. As you know, our organization is entirely men, except for you. And most of them can’t even use magic. To be honest, if it comes down to a magical showdown, the person in our organization with the highest chance of survival is you.”

“...In other words, this is a job only I can do?”

I see!

“I’ve already told you that.” My boss let out a sigh of exasperation.

Feeling somewhat nervous, I looked over the description of the target witch one more time—



Her hair was the color of ash. It went down to about her hips and swayed gently in the summer breeze blowing across the seats at the café terrace.

Her eyes were lapis-colored. They were tranquil like the sea in midwinter, looking at the complete breakfast that had been placed before her, consisting of a boiled egg, toast, and black coffee.

She was a traveler, clad in a pointy black hat and black robe. Upon her breast was the star-shaped brooch that served as proof that she was a witch. In short, she was a traveler and a witch. She must have been around her late teens. Something about her was unrefined. As she worked diligently to peel the shell from her boiled egg, she looked like someone’s adorable daughter helping her mother in the kitchen.

Finally, the cute daughter (the witch) finished peeling her egg and gulped her coffee down in one mouthful. She loved it—black, or with a splash of milk, or with a sprinkling of sugar, as long as it was coffee. Even better to drink the first few sips black, then add a dash of milk and sugar to experience all the different flavors.

Coffee is the best, she thought, letting out a sigh as she set the cup down.

Oddly enough, she was picky about her boiled eggs.

She thought it was best when the yolk crumbled into bits as soon as she pulled her mouth away after taking a bite. That way it was easy to sprinkle with salt. The very definition of hard-boiled.

“...What a beautiful morning.”

This witch seated at a highly reviewed café, taking a break from her travels—just who could she be?

That’s right. She’s me.

“.....”

I could take in the scenery of this country from my terrace seat at the café. The city was lined with white-painted walls and uniform buildings. The ground was paved with brick, spreading out to form a fan-shaped pattern. The people trotting over it were shopping, or engaged in friendly conversation, or walking around people-watching like me.

It seemed like a nice, safe, clean city, though the scenery wasn’t anything special.

The everyday lives of the people were spread out before me.

And so I was blending into the scene by taking a rest at a café.

“Excuse me, miss... If you don’t mind, could I get your autograph?”

I was drinking my coffee, lost in thought about what I should do after breakfast, when the waitress brought me a piece of colored paper and a pen, along with another cup of java.

“The coffee’s on the house,” she added.

“My autograph? Why...?” I’m sure I was making quite a puzzled expression. “I’m not famous or anything, you know?” *I’m just your average traveler.*

The waitress looked very excited. “This is my first time seeing a witch! I’ve always aspired to be one, so I was moved when I saw you today!”

Her two light brown pigtails bobbed, tied at the back of her head. She peered at me with blue eyes, edging closer and closer. “So, um, if you don’t mind, I want to decorate the shop with it!”

“...Well, I guess I don’t really mind.”

I took the pen and smoothly wrote my name on the colored paper. It was a sloppy signature like I would do at the front desk of an inn.

“Here you go.” I handed it back to her, and the waitress held it like it was something precious.

“Thank you! Please drink that coffee, okay? It’s made with love!”

...But I was still working on my first cup. What the heck was that all about?

I couldn’t say I didn’t find that waitress strangely suspicious. *Also, what did she mean by saying this was made with love? It looks like a totally ordinary cup of coffee.*

A witch wasn’t opposed to hospitality, but it felt peculiar.

“Hey, Miss Witch. You’re cute. You alone? Wanna have coffee with me?”

As I picked up the cup that the waitress had just given me, a sketchy man sat down across from me.

“.....”

A witch isn’t opposed to being treated in a flippant way. Rather, she knows that if she places a curse on the man propositioning her to make him spew blood from every orifice in his body, then the world will become a little bit more peaceful.

“I’m sorry. I’m a bit busy right now.” With a sigh, I brought the lovingly prepared coffee to my lips.

There are all kinds of ways to enjoy a cup of java. For example, as I told you

earlier, you can enjoy it by taking the first few sips black before adding milk and sugar. Or you can enjoy it black from beginning to end. Anyway, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that a single cup holds infinite possibilities.

When considering your cup of coffee, which holds an endless expansion of enjoyment, the first thing you ought to do is inhale and feel the aroma flood the inside of your chest. I think there's nothing better.

"I know a place that has better coffee. How 'bout it? Let's go together."

"....."

The sharp steam from the coffee blended with his cologne and his shallow words and actions, transforming into something truly repulsive. My heart dropped. The aroma of the high-quality coffee had undergone a complete change into something that seemed more like muddy water. I felt like throwing up.

"It's definitely better! Really! I might not look the part, but you know, I'm quite the coffee connoisseur!"

"...Huh?"

I was ignoring the man and enjoying the coffee aroma for a bit when I realized something strange.

Mixed in with the coffee and the stench of garbage wafting off of the pile of human trash was a slight medicinal odor. It was hard to notice beneath the smell, yet there was an acrid smell that had no business in a café. It was just the slightest hint of a scent.

To test out this theory, I took some distance from the man.

"Hey! Wait! Are you ignoring me? That's mean!"

Even when I isolated the cup from his filthy stench, the medicinal smell still wafted off it.

I kept sniffing around for a while, trying to identify the scent.

"...Ah!"

Then, I realized.

This is poison!

Poison with the secret potential to make me nauseous from the pit of my stomach if I drank it. What's worse, it was an awful type that would only show its true power when mixed with coffee. If I were to drink this, I would puke all over myself in front of the whole town.

What was all that about yearning to become a witch like me? What was all that about making this with love? Does love mean projectile vomiting?

When I looked around me, I couldn't see the waitress anymore. Not inside the café, not in the crowd, not anywhere in sight.

"....."

Could it be that I'm being targeted by someone?

With a bad hunch, I decided to leave the café right then.

"Hey, wait! What about our date?"

"Sorry. Gotta run. I'm busy. I've got plans," I lied, collecting my things. "I'll give you this coffee. I've already had some of it, though. I'm not a fan."

I pushed the poisoned coffee toward the man and made my escape.

Even I thought my sloppy lie about being sensitive to coffee was rather transparent, but the shallow man bought it wholesale. He even had a lewd look on his face.

"Oh, leftovers? Really? Lucky me!"

"Yeah, go ahead."

Another lie.



"What's the status on the matter with that witch?"

When I returned to the office, the boss was wearing another sour expression.

I had donned a somber black robe on top of my waitress getup to lend a hard-boiled feel to it all, and as I answered, I flipped the robe dramatically, causing my brown pigtails to bounce.

“As expected. I brought down the witch with my own hands! Right about now, that woman ought to be dying of embarrassment in front of the whole city!”

It was the perfect strategy.

The “Fictional Witch” in question had been leisurely enjoying her breakfast at a café in town, so I had gotten her autograph and hung it up in the restaurant. There was nothing more embarrassing in this world than having your signature hanging in a café despite not being famous for anything. *That witch must be feeling so much shame that she would rather crawl in a hole and die! And of course, in this plan, there is no such hole.*

I slickly told my boss the details of the plan that had taken down the evil witch.

And here’s what my boss had to say after silently lending me his ear: “So I suppose you saw her become mortified with your own eyes?”

“Huh? Of course not.”

I would get secondhand embarrassment.

“.....” At this point, my boss let out a huge sigh. “You... Okay, listen up. First of all, there’s no way a witch would die just because she was mistaken for someone famous, right?”

“She would die in the social sense.”

“No, I want you to physically kill her. Also, the witch wasn’t even humiliated.”

“Uh.”

“On the contrary, one of our own agents got mixed up in all this and threw up at the café.”

“Uh.” *What do you mean? Did he drink coffee or something? Coffee is basically poison.*

“...From now on, you’re only to carry out your plans after informing your colleagues, all right?”

“.....”

After that, the day ended with me getting a long scolding from the boss.

I swore to him that I would do some serious reflection and bring down the witch with an even more perfect plan the next day. I stayed up all night working out my new scheme. Enjoying a cup of drug-laced coffee while rolling out blueprints and brooding over them (though I had absolutely no idea what was written on them) made me seem like a case-hardened detective.

And then I threw up.

I had one week to carry out my plan. I wasn't going to think about what would happen in the event that I was unable to bring down the Fictional Witch within that time period.

Since I had recorded a crushing defeat on day one, I decided to use the next five days to diligently study the witch. On the final day, I would bring this matter to an end... When I told the boss about this plan, he replied, "Oh, cool." His attitude was as cold as ice.

Day one of surveillance.

The morning sun was dazzling today.

The witch had been lounging at a café since morning. I could practically hear her challenging me: *"You're not really that scary. Go on, hit me anywhere you like!"*

Today she ordered only a cup of coffee, perhaps because she's on her guard. However, she hadn't taken a single sip, watching as the coffee placed before her gradually lost all of its steam. I *knew* coffee was disgusting. She must have forced herself to drink it yesterday. I understood.

I continued staking out the café until evening.

Those boring hours were a struggle against drowsiness.

But it was especially at times like these that we must compose ourselves. True victory awaited me if I remained patient.

So that was why I drank coffee to keep me awake while I was on my stakeout.

And I puked it back up.

Night fell, and I withdrew from the café when it was time for it to close. I made sure to clean up my vomit, by the way.

Day two of surveillance.

The morning sun was blinding.

The witch had been lounging at the café since earlier. Why on earth could she be haunting the same café day after day? Could she be biding her time until I attack again?

But since I had decided not to try anything for five days, I spent this day on a stakeout, drinking coffee and throwing it up.

Day three of surveillance.

“Oh no, the hurl girl is here again.”

“It’s the puker. She’s back.”

“Watch, she’s definitely going to order coffee, and she’s definitely going to barf it back up.”

“It’s pretty much guaranteed she’ll throw up.”

“There’s a one hundred percent chance of vomit in today’s forecast.”

The café staff surrounded me at a distance, whispering among themselves. I could hear everything they said, but being the cynical type, I was accustomed to a certain degree of prejudice.

So I had coffee today, too. I gulped it down with gusto.

And up it came, in record-breaking volume.

Day four of surveillance.

I started puking in the morning, throwing up at the café to vomit.

By the way, the witch had deliberately placed a single cup of coffee on the table in front of her.

My vomit soundtrack would continue as long as she did not move.

Day five of surveillance.

The boss summoned me first thing in the morning.

“What are you doing every day at that café?” he asked.

Huh? What’s this? Is this boss of mine stalking me?

Apparently, a letter of complaint had arrived from the café, stating, “We’d like you to do something about your subordinate who has been vomiting at our café every single day. She’s been really bad for business.”

After he gave me a piece of his mind, I snuck back over to the café.

The witch was there on that day, too.

The only thing I learned over five days of surveillance was the fact that the witch was going to the same café and sitting there in a daze from morning to night, totally exposed.

The only thing I could be certain of was that I had plenty of opportunities.

I simply had to jump on the opportunity, right?

The following day...

I finally set out to execute my plan. I had been ordered to kill her, but killing went against my principles. So I decided to capture her instead.

On this day, she was parked in a seat at the café without a care, coffee sitting on the table in front of her. Completely defenseless. If I was going to do it, it had to be now.

I gripped my wand and came up directly behind her, then shouted as I cast a spell, “All riiight!”

It was a handcuff spell—an amazing spell that forcibly entrapped my opponent in the type of handcuffs that bound even the fingers with solid chains.

By the way, it had taken me a week to learn it.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! How’s that? You can’t do anything like this, can you? Serves you right!” I laughed loudly in the café as I dragged the Fictional Witch off by the scruff of her neck.

Let’s get you back to the office!

But—

“...Um, are you an idiot?”

Someone tapped my shoulder.

“Huh? What’s your deal?”

When I turned around, I saw a witch with ash-colored hair and lapis-colored eyes.

Huh? What the heck? Why is my captive just standing there? What’s going on?

“Did you really think the dummy sitting at the café all day was me?”

When I looked more carefully, the Fictional Witch in my bindings was just a doll with the same appearance as the witch.

She hadn’t been coming to the café every day for five days. This doll had been sitting here the whole time.

That was her trick.

I was made acutely aware of this fact in that moment.

“You dummy,” the witch said as she fired a spell in my direction.



I had realized on the first day of my stay that I was being targeted by someone. Right away, I took steps to protect myself from whoever it was. The following day, I had gone to the café before it opened.

“Umm, excuse me? ...Would it be okay for me to put this doll in one of the terrace seats?” I asked.

It was a mannequin that imitated my appearance to a T. From the modeling on its face to the shape of its figure—even the texture of its skin was exactly like mine. For a witch of my caliber, making this was a piece of cake.

“Huh? This...? Well, we don’t really do that sort of thing here...”

The manager was a little confused.

“I should have said this earlier, but my name is Elaina. The Ashen Witch, Elaina.” I introduced myself politely. “By the way, I’m quite famous.” I pointed to the autograph decorating the café wall.

I suspected that whomever had tried to get me to drink poisoned coffee on the first day had placed it there.

I had absolutely no idea what purpose it was supposed to serve, but I was going to take the liberty of using it against them.

“A famous person...” The manager started mulling it over.

“Think about it, Mr. Manager. My signature is here on your wall, right? And I have a doll of myself, right?”

“Yes...”

“And we’re going to put it on the terrace, right?”

“Hmm.”

“It’ll be great for business!”

“Let’s do it.”

The manager and I shook hands firmly.

Then, the mannequin was put into place, and I began my surveillance of Lady Barfsalot (my temporary nickname for her), who was surveilling me.

She watched me for five whole days, covering herself with puke as she did.
Great job.

But I was not the least bit inclined to reward her efforts.

“You dummy.”

I fired several orbs of magical energy, blasting her, but not enough to kill her. I thought that if I blasted her, she probably wouldn’t come after me anymore.

“Well, that’s all taken care of.”

I considered collecting my mannequin, but that would make it look like I’d lost to a mere customer in some way, so I decided to leave it where it was.

This way, it can live a life of dignified leisure, drinking coffee at a café, I suppose.

“Oh, excuse me. One coffee, please.”

I sat opposite the mannequin and raised my hand to call the manager over.

Startled to see the same face sitting across from itself, the manager placed my coffee and a refill for the mannequin's cup on the table and left.

I was enjoying the aroma of my coffee.

"W-wait right there...! We're not done here!"

Panting and puffing, the mage reappeared. Her brown pigtails were in disarray, and strands were sticking to her sweaty face. She must have run back here after being blown away.

"Oh, hi there." I greeted her with a bob of my head. It wasn't well received.

"Did you think I would just give up? Well, too bad! I won't give up until I've knocked you out with all my power!"

The girl took her wand in hand, prepared herself, and cast a spell in my direction.

It was just a crude burst of blue-white light, a collection of magical energy.

"Pff—" I curled the corners of my mouth up slightly and raised my wand as I balanced my cup in my hand. "You really are a dummy. As if something like that would be effective—"

But the spell she had cast slipped right through and blasted my head to bits.

My mannequin's head, that is.

"...That's not me."

I showered her with spheres of magical energy again and sent her flying.

Then I repaired the mannequin.

Even after that, she kept coming back, over and over again.

"Too bad for you! I'll come back as often as it takes!"

Well, I blasted her away again.

"My name is Yuuri! I'm an elite mage working as a spy in this country!" It was a little late for her to be introducing herself, and she wasn't acting with the slightest bit of secrecy despite being a self-proclaimed spy. I had a whole host of

questions, which made my head throb. So for the time being, I simply fired more magic at her.

“Oh? What’s this? Is that all you got? If you want to take me down, you better hit me with something stronger!”

I went along with her suggestion and blasted her away more forcefully.

“I mean, what’s with you? What is the deal with witches? Why are you sharing a table with a mannequin? It’s so gross, I’m gonna puke.”

I blasted her away.

“I have to bring you down! Now kindly behave and let me finish you off, you evil witch!”

I blasted her away, and you know the rest.

“...Come on, just one hit would be nice, so won’t you just take it? I really just want to land one hit! Okay? Please?!”

I blasted... Well, you know the rest.

“...Come oooooon! Die!”

I... You know the rest.

“I’m putting all my power into this one attack!” ...You know the rest.

“I was still in the middle of chanting my spell...” ...You know.

“.....Humph. *Grrrr*.”

Finally, the ragged girl appeared before me, her breath ragged from crying.

“...I *hate* witches.”

She was gripping her skirt tightly.

“Would you like to borrow this to wipe your tears?”

“I’m not crying.” Yuuri snatched up the handkerchief I offered to her.

“Yes you are.”

“Am not.” Yuuri blew her nose into my handkerchief.

What is this girl doing?

“...You can keep that.”

“...Thanks.”

“...Feel another cry coming on?”

“...I’m going home.”

And then she slowly walked away.

Her back had an air of sorrow about it.



●

“You’re fired.”

It was the following day.

I went to the office as always, when the boss hit me with those words and nothing else.

“Whaaat...? You’re joking, right?”

I was half laughing, unable to fully believe him. However, the eyes of the boss as he stared at me were merciless.

“I’m serious.”

“.....”

“Listen. This latest directive was not just an internal affair. We had appeals from other countries, too. But you screwed up. Do you know what this means? Think about it with that tiny brain of yours.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“This isn’t something that can be solved with an apology. Thanks to your screwup, the reputation of my organization has been dragged through the mud. To make matters worse, you caused a huge uproar at the coffee shop. You’ve got a heavy burden of responsibility here.”

“...Like how much?”

“Like this much.” The boss raised his hand and pointed it at me. His rugged hand was covered in a black glove and holding a revolver.

He was pointing it at my head.

“...Y-you’re joking, right?”

“I’m serious.”

This was the first time anyone had genuinely intended to kill me.

“Th-that can’t be...!” I was frantic, holding my wavering voice in check. “That can’t be right! All I did was fail one important assignment, right? Why do I have to die?! I’ve worked here for a long time—I may still be immature, but I won’t

mess up again! So come on...”

“Get out. Now. If you leave, I won’t have to get my hands dirty.”

“Were you listening—?”

“Even if I’m not the one to kill you, many people in this country will come after you. It’s probably a good idea for you to leave town. But news of your failure is already spreading to our neighbors. If you don’t get far away before anyone finds out, I’m guessing you’ll be assassinated.”

“.....”

“I can’t bring myself to lay a hand on you... You were like a daughter to me. Could you just piss off to somewhere I don’t know about, please? I’m firing you so I don’t have to do something worse.”

He didn’t want to get his own hands dirty, so he was taking my leash off and throwing me out. He would have nothing to do with what happened after that, whether I died a dog’s death or whatever else. I understood the implication.

“You won’t protect me?” I choked out, but that was all I could say.

“Of course not. That’s what it means to be a spy. We dispose of you when you’re no longer useful, even if you’re an ally, even if you’re gifted. You’re no exception.”

“.....”

Without saying anything, I just stood stock-still.

“Take care and try not to get killed before you leave the country.”

Those were the last words my boss ever said to me.



It was the day after Yuuri had given up on me and gone home.

I was at my usual café. Actually, I hadn’t particularly planned on coming here, but what can I say? I had grown to like the taste of their hard-boiled eggs.

Since the townscape as viewed from the terrace seating had its own kind of charm, I had decided to sit in my usual seat.

“—*Sniff*. This is all your fault. I’m gonna hate you for the rest of my life.”

However, it seemed another customer had arrived before me.

“...If you had just let me take you down like the directive said, I could have finished the job without getting fired. I could have continued forever as a spy. I hate witches.”

It was Yuuri.

Fat teardrops spilling from her eyes, she sat across from my mannequin, blabbing on forever in total despair. Didn't that make her feel worse?

“It's all over... How did it turn out like this...?”

She was cradling her knees, hunched over on the chair. Balanced atop her knees was a pointy hat that was heartrendingly squashed.

“Are you sure it wasn't because you're still immature?” I gently planted my hand on her head.

“Wha...?!” She turned around, and after looking back and forth between me and the mannequin several times, she quickly wiped her tears. “I w-wasn't crying!”

“Oh, is that so...?”

Shall I lend you another handkerchief?

“What? Did you come to laugh at me?”

“No, I just came to eat breakfast. Aren't you here for the same reason?”

She suddenly turned her face away from me. “...That's right.”

“You don't look like you've ordered yet.” The tabletop was empty.

“...I was just about to.”

“Well then, mind ordering something for me, too?”

“Do you hear yourself? No way.”

“No, not for *me*. Order for the version of 'me' across from you.”

“...Fine.”

“Great.”

I tossed the mannequin off to the side somewhere and sat opposite the girl.

“.....” Yuuri glared at me without saying anything. “I’m not going to treat you.”

“It’s not nice to lie, you know?” I think I let out a little laugh. “If you treat me, I’ll tell you about your future.”

“...What?”

“I think we’re ready to order.” I raised my hand and called a waitress over. “A double order of my usual breakfast, please.”

We both sat in silence until the waitress returned with our food. I wasn’t particularly bothered by it, but Yuuri seemed to have been in agony the whole time.

“...What?” she barked, sounding all prickly as our breakfast was being set in front of us.

“Seems like they kicked you out of that spy organization, huh?”

Cutting off any chance for a light roundabout conversation, I spoke up right away as I gently tapped the shell of my egg on the table. “Was yesterday the deadline for ‘taking me out’?”

“Why do you know about that? Where did you hear that?”

“I knew as soon as you sat down at this table.”

“You mean you knew from the start?”

“You know, you won’t impress anyone by chattering on about the details of your work in public. I don’t think you make a very good spy.”

“.....”

She clammed up. She was probably feeling self-conscious.

“So, they drove you out because you still had some growing up to do, huh? That’s too bad.”

“...It’s all your fault.”

“It probably would have turned out that way even if I hadn’t been your

opponent.” *If that was the extent of your true abilities.* “Wouldn’t you have been fired somewhere down the line once they found out you were useless? Whether your opponent was me or someone else, it would have turned out the same way eventually.”

Sooner or later, that would have been her fate. That’s all there was to say.

I continued pressing her. “But why do you think everything is ‘over’ just because you were fired? Don’t you think you need some perspective?”

For example, for a given cup of coffee, there were some people who preferred it black, and there were those who liked to add milk and sugar.

...And I supposed there were also girls who disliked it so much they puked all over themselves.

In other words—

“Look at a cup of coffee. It can take on many different flavors depending on the person drinking it. How about it? How about trying to look at your current situation a different way?”

“...Like how?”

“Let me see...” I looked up at the sky. After pretending to think for a little while, I chomped into my egg. “Well, how about something like this?”

And then I said, “Think of this as starting life anew.”

You just graduated from the spy organization, ordered to go out into the greater world. So maybe you’re being driven out of this country partly by force. But don’t you think you would be welcomed back with open arms if you returned as an excellent mage?

Don’t you think that would be a cool way to live?

I said something along those lines.

“.....” She went silent again.

However, her dark expression was gone. “...So cool. So hard-boiled... That might work,” she mumbled to herself, the color gradually returning to her face.

So, you like hard-boiled detectives?

“You don’t really have time to be wasting, then. Why don’t you go learn things out there in the greater world? What you’re missing is experience.”

She was quite hardheaded, which I realized when she had thought she could win just by blasting me with balls of magical energy. She was on the same level as a boiled egg.

I placed an envelope on the table and stood up.

“Well, since you’ll be going, I’ll give you this as a gift for your brand-new life. Open it and take a look in a year’s time.”

She took the securely closed envelope and frowned. “I think I’m probably going to open it right away.”

“Oh, that’s fine. I’ve placed a spell on it so that if you open it before a year has passed, the letter inside will burn up and disappear. It’ll be a huge disaster if you open it.”

“That’s not fine at all...”

That’s why I told you not to open it. What’s wrong with you?

“The letter contains guidelines for traveling and secrets for becoming a strong magic user. If you train diligently for a year, I bet you’ll see satisfying results.”

I dropped a single gold coin on the table with a *thunk* and sat the mannequin back in its seat. “All right. After you enjoy a pleasant breakfast with this version of me, please hurry up and leave the country.”

Still sitting across from the mannequin, the girl opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“Huh? I thought I was treating you to breakfast.”

“I lied.”



It was the day after I had come to this country and subsequently almost drank coffee poisoned by Yuuri.

I was in a coffee shop. As I walked around town, I was flagged down by a gaudy man (which was the same guy who had tried to pick me up).

Again with this guy? I thought. He had changed completely from the previous day, wearing a sour look on his face. In the end, I decided to go with him, wondering what was going on.

I followed him until we arrived at this coffee shop.

“I have a request for you.”

On the other side of the counter, an austere older man crossed his hands and told me he was the boss of a spy organization.

He assumed an even more serious expression. “There is a young girl in our group. Her name is Yuuri. She’s the girl who asked for your autograph yesterday.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’ll get straight to the point. Will you please help me drive her out of this country?”

I was about to ask why, but the man was already continuing to speak. “Well, we’ve already put together this plan to drive her away.”

The man flung a single file toward the stool, a folder with **DIRECTIVE FOR THE ASSASSINATION OF THE FICTIONAL WITCH** written on it.

I was urged to read the contents, so I opened it without hesitation.

Written in the file was a profile of a witch with an appearance and personal history that closely resembled mine, along with a call for her elimination on account of being an evil influence. The only apparent difference was the witch’s name. I didn’t go by a title that sounded as fake as “the Fictional Witch.”

“I never imagined a witch with ashen hair would actually come to our country. I made a miscalculation. I doubt this reflects your personal history, but—with this directive, you’ve been transformed into quite the villain.”

“.....”

“Why are you looking away?”

“No reason.” I changed the subject. “So why is Yuuri supposed to assassinate her?”

“It’s a long story, but—” The sour-looking man told me the story reluctantly.

It recounted the past.

The man had picked up Yuuri when she was still an infant. Apparently, she had been abandoned. Feeling pity for her, he showered her with parental love and raised her as his own.

Yuuri grew up an obedient child. One could even call her naive.

She respected the job that this man—her father—did and started to help him with his work. However, she was in no way cut out to be a spy. Her heart was simply too kind.

“I can’t protect her forever. Yuuri has one foot in this world, which isn’t as nice as she thinks. It’s as filthy as mud.”

I imagined he was committing murders and other heinous acts, which he hid from Yuuri. Beneath those black gloves, his hands were so stained with blood that he could certainly never expose them in public—and that was something he himself understood quite well.

“So that’s why you want to distance yourself from her?”

“That’s what it comes down to. So I came up with the plan of the Fictional Witch.”

“.....”

According to his plan, he would task Yuuri with the assassination of the Fictional Witch. Since she would be searching for a witch who shouldn’t exist in the first place, she would fail in her duties. As soon as that happened, he was planning to condemn her and drive her away.

However, my arrival complicated things.

I see.

“In other words, you’d like me to play along and knock her around a bit and make her feel powerless. On top of that, you want me to give her a beacon of hope as I drive her out of the country?”

“I guess that’s what I’m asking, yes.”

“You have no problem putting me in a tough spot.”

“I think you can do it, being the witch you are.”

“Don’t underestimate me.”

I’m more than capable.

I had one question.

“Why did you come up with a plan to assassinate a witch who looks like me?”

“.....” He was quiet for a moment. “It’s a long story, but—”

“Give me the abridged version, please.”

“.....” He was quiet again. “A long time ago, when I was still young, I was commissioned to assassinate a witch who looked like you. But she easily turned the tables on me.”

“Huh...”

Well, your opponent was a witch, after all.

“And I fell in love. She was a strong, amazing, beautiful woman.”

“Oh...?”

Well, she was a witch, after all.

“The witch disappeared after several days, but I’ve never been able to forget that encounter—anyhow, she was the first person to ever defeat me. So that’s why I drew up the directive this way. I remember that time well. At this point, it’s become a treasured memory.”

That’s the story the man told me as he stroked his black gloves.

So, her outward appearance and whatnot didn’t really matter. He simply couldn’t be bothered to come up with a new face.

So that’s what’s going on. But—

“Why is she the ‘Fictional Witch’?” I asked.

He smiled masochistically.

“Because the directive is a work of fiction.”

●

A year had passed since the incident, and in order to fulfill my promise to a certain witch, I opened the letter in a coffee shop I visited along my travels.

It didn't burn up. Several sheets of slightly discolored stationery peeked out shyly from inside.

The handwriting was quite rough and unrefined, as if it had been written by a middle-aged man and not a girl about the same age as me.

"...It was all a bunch of lies."

It contains guidelines for traveling and secrets for becoming a strong magic user. That had been a dirty lie. The letter contained nothing of the sort. I read until the words went blurry. What was written there were well-wishes on my departure, requests for me to come see him, warnings that he would kill any potential boyfriends but that he wanted to see his grandchild's face, et cetera. It was a letter sent from a father to his daughter, full of paternal doting.

How stupid.

"Oh? What happened? Were you shocked you failed the advancement exams again?" The black-haired witch who sat down next to me laughed loudly, as if she saw me as just a dumb kid.

"I'm not crying."

"If you're hurting, I can give you some advice."

"I said I'm not crying. Geez!" I wiped my tears and punched her shoulder.

The witch—Saya—acted like it didn't hurt and laughed. "But that's really too bad. How many times does this make?"

"Five."

"I failed way more times than that. You're fine!"

"Fine? How...?"

"Well, I also went through this phase long ago. But thanks to an incredible witch—"

"How many times have you told me this story? I'm sick of it."

Currently, I was studying magic while I traveled around to all sorts of countries, working my way toward the top rank of mage—toward becoming a witch’s apprentice.

Well, that would be no easy feat, but if I could manage that, I could handle anything. Right now, however, I was feeling disheartened as a self-supporting student who had failed several times already.

I had met Saya while living the student’s life. She had been working part-time proctoring exams to top up her traveling expense fund, and, maybe because she pitied me as a particularly poor student or because she sensed something about me, she had been following me around the whole time I took the exam.

“I met Elaina in this country, you know. Oh, I remember it clearly even now—”

This crowded country packed with busy rooftops apparently only admits mages. All the more ideal for certain travelers to hone their skills in magical combat! Hooray!

That was all well and good, but more importantly, the witch named Elaina who appeared in Saya’s story bore a striking resemblance in both appearance and personality to the witch who had taught me a thing or two. But what on earth could I say about that?

“—and so...hmm? Huh? Yuuri, what’s with that handkerchief?”

“Hmm?”

Saya had been chattering away, but her eyes fell on my handkerchief, and she stopped talking.

“This is—Look, you know that story I told you before? This was given to me by the witch who inspired me to leave my home country.”

“Huh...”

She stared hard at the handkerchief and mumbled to herself, “No...it can’t be...but like this...huh? Seriously? No...no wayyy...”

Sometimes I really didn’t understand Saya.

To escape her gaze, I set the handkerchief down beside the letter and picked up my coffee cup.

“What’s that letter?”

Saya’s eyes moved from the handkerchief to the letter.

“This? I got it from my father.”

“Hmm...”

“...Why do you have to look at me with doubt in your eyes? I’m telling you that’s the truth, okay? I’m not lying.”

“Can I read it?”

“I don’t think you’ll find it very interesting.”

“That’s not true!” With a smile, she took the letter from me. She read the letter, mumbling “Mm-hmm,” and “Mm? I knew it. This scent...”

Beside her, I brought my cup of black coffee to my mouth.

Thinking about it now, it had probably been nearly one year since I last drank coffee.

Even with all that happened, it wasn’t bad to have a little taste of home from time to time while traveling.

At some point, I would become an even more splendid mage. At that time, I think even my stubborn boss, as hardheaded as a hard-boiled egg, would be happy to see me again.

With everything that happened, I think I can summarize this story in a single phrase.

That phrase being: *The very definition of hard-boiled.*

Sorry. I lied.

“Huh? There’s one more sheet of stationery left in this envelope.”

“What?”

That can’t be right. That’s what I thought, but sure enough, Saya slipped a single piece of paper out of the envelope. *No way.*

“.....”

“.....”

We put our heads together and both read what was written on the paper.

P.S.

I forgot to tell you one thing, so I included this sheet as a postscript.

Recently, one of the local cafés has started a service where you can be seated with mannequins. This is really the best of the best of the best.

I think I can summarize what I want to say in a single phrase:

Mannequins are great.

I threw up.



CHAPTER 3

Likes and Dislikes

“...Ughhh, don’t tell me *these* things are mixed into the dish...”

Saya was sitting across from me, glaring hatefully at her lunch special, which was the same as mine. For no reason other than the price, we had both chosen the most inexpensive option, but apparently, she had found something disagreeable about it.

“You don’t like mushrooms?” I asked, peering at her plate.

She had carefully removed the mushrooms from her pasta. Saya glared daggers at the limp pieces of fungi separated from the rest of her meal.

“I hate them! I mean, they grow off of trees! Which means that these things *are* trees, right?! I don’t make a habit of eating trees, plus they have an awful slimy texture, and worst of all, they have this strange shape! It’s vile. I should be asking you how you manage to stomach them. It makes no sense!” she claimed, puffing out her cheeks.

I saw now that she had built up an irrational hatred of mushrooms.

“But you can’t become a witch if you’re picky. If you want to become an apprentice, you have to endure eating foods you hate.”

“...Seriously?”

“Seriously.” I stabbed each and every one of the mushrooms on the plate in front of me with my fork, moving them to her plate. “Consider this part of your training. Eat up.”

“Um, hang on...”

“You can do it.”

I put on a show of eating my very desolate pasta free of all mushrooms.

“Aaaah...this is hell.”

Gazing at her pasta, covered in two portions’ worth of mushrooms, Saya lost

all hope.

It was several days later.

“Um, I’ll have the carbonara, please.” Saya no longer ordered the daily special. “What will you have, Elaina?”

“What is the lunch special?” I asked.

The server who had come to take our orders answered, “It’s a mushroom cream pasta.”

“Urk...that’s the same as last time.”

I glanced sidelong at Saya, who was making a sour face, looking at the server. “All right, could I have that without mushrooms?”

The server made a face like he wanted to say “*Isn’t that just creamy pasta?*” but only nodded and repeated our orders back to us before leaving.

“.....” Saya spoke after a little while. “Elaina, do you not like mushrooms?”

She was wearing a puzzled expression.

“Correct. I hate them. They grow off of trees, and I hate the texture and the shape and everything about them. I hate them so much that I’d like to completely disavow their existence.”

“.....And you were so preachy the other day. Geez...”

She looked sulky, and then I answered her with a sly grin. “Did I say anything about *witches* being picky?”



CHAPTER 4

The Apple Murders

Deep in the forest, there was an inn.

Late one night, a beautiful crescent moon was hanging over that very structure, making it look just like a castle from the outside. Suddenly, a scream rang out.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

It was easy to imagine that something was amiss. All the people staying at the inn were probably thinking the same thing. As I dashed from my room, I caught sight of several other guests spilling out into the hallway in confusion just like me.

After sprinting down the hall, I figured out where the scream had come from.

A crowd had formed a circle in the lounge.

I said a “crowd,” but I could have counted everybody on two hands. The inn wasn’t particularly full.

“Hey...this is...”

“I can’t believe someone would do something so terrible...”

“I-it was already like this when I found it...!”

The confusion was spreading.

Slipping through the small crowd, I entered the center of the circle.

“Did something happen?” I asked no one in particular before I largely grasped what had taken place.

In the center of the lounge, lying stretched out on the carpet, was a woman traveler who was staying at this inn. Her name was Marie.

She was very pretty, and since she had a calm demeanor, kind personality, and shapely figure, rumors had quickly begun to circulate that she was far too cute to be a simple traveler (according to her, anyway). Now she was lying there

limply.

She had donned a very expensive-looking dress, and her complexion was pale and bloodless. I wondered why she had gotten all fancy, seeing as we were stuck here in an inn in the middle of nowhere.

She didn't appear to be breathing. Her chest wasn't moving up and down, and she was stiff as a doll.

That was not the only suspicious thing about the scene. She was collapsed faceup, and next to her lay a single apple, missing a big bite.

Dark red liquid spilled from Marie's mouth, making quite a mess of the carpet.

She probably died eating this apple—that's certainly what it looks like.

"Do you suppose she ate a poisoned apple or something...?" An employee of the inn timidly looked around at the small crowd. She was probably the person who first discovered Marie. Her voice matched the scream I had heard earlier.

"A poisoned apple? Why would it just be sitting out in a place like this?" A dark-skinned traveler voiced his doubts. *I'll nickname you Mr. Tan Man.*

"Oh, I was, you know! I was in my room until now! Really!" There was a suspicious person who suddenly tried to prove an alibi even though no one had asked. *I think your type is the most suspicious.*

"This is...the curse of the apple... She disrespected the sacred apple...and punishment...was delivered..." A girl wearing gothic Lolita clothes looked down on Marie's corpse and spit on it. *How filthy.*

"Please calm down—did anyone witness her final moments? Or did you see any suspicious persons?" The manager of the inn addressed everyone in the room in an admonishing tone.

"As if there would be any witnesses!" barked a drunk woman holding a large bottle of booze.

She was right. Everyone looked around at their fellow guests, and nobody had any useful information to offer. There were very few guests and employees present, given how ridiculously spacious and extravagant the place was. In these kinds of situations, where everybody was familiar with everyone's faces,

word of anybody acting suspicious was sure to spread quickly.

“...So that means this was an accident. She unknowingly ate a poisoned apple that just happened to be sitting here—” I put a hand to my chin, puzzling over my own words. “No... Could that really be true? This is just a baseless guess, but the reality is that it doesn’t matter if this was a murder or an accident. I think what we’ve got here is something different than either of those typical scenarios.”

The six people around me all looked at me in unison. *What on earth is she talking about?* they had to be wondering.

Letting that wash past me, I began to spin a tale.

“I’ve heard there is a certain legend in this land. Do you know of it?” I questioned.

Goth Girl answered right away. “...Do you mean...the Legend of the Apples...?”

The Legend of the Apples.

Indeed. I nodded.

The majority of the people there didn’t know a thing about it and cocked their heads in confusion.

Do I have to spell it out? I was thinking when Goth Girl launched into her own explanation.

“In this land, there is a legend that people will fall into an eternal sleep after eating an apple, which happens very rarely. The tale dates back three hundred years. A witch who was jealous of the good looks of a beautiful girl who dwelled in the forest put the girl into an eternal slumber by poisoning an apple. But several days later, a necrophile prince passed right by the girl’s body and was so moved by her cuteness that he kissed her on the spot. After she came back to life, the necrophile prince spit out, ‘What the—? I have no interest in *living* girls. Come see me again after you die,’ and left. Since then, poison apples grow periodically in this forest. And they are fated to be eaten by beautiful girls, no matter the era. Also, the girls are always awakened by the kiss of a prince. That’s how the legend goes.”

“Um, yeah.”

I pulled quite far away from Goth Girl, who was strangely talkative in her field of expertise.

“...In other words, she will come back to life if a prince kisses her?” Mr. Tan Man laughed scornfully. He didn’t seem to believe a word of Goth Girl’s story. “All right, I’ll kiss her and make her wake up.”

He didn’t seem to believe the legend, but in his mind, lust had probably given the boot to any sense of reason, making him act strangely. His eyes had gone bloodshot.

“Wait! I’ll—I’ll do it!” The suspicious man had red eyes, too, but I thought I remembered that he had been like that from the beginning. *Maybe he’s sleep deprived?*

“Now, now, gentlemen. Stop this.” The dandy manager stepped in to stop the two of them. “I shall do it.”

Uh-oh, he wasn’t stepping in to stop them at all!

“Wait. I’m the one who told the Legend of the Apples. So I have the right to place my mouth on hers.” Goth Girl had entered the ring of men, and I backed away from her.

“...Men are idiots.” The drunk woman drank her sake as she watched from a distance while the men quarreled raucously over the corpse. Their argument was livening up her drinking session.

“...There’s one girl in the mix.”

The inn employee, who was the only sensible one in the place, cried, “I want to go home.”

In the end, Marie’s corpse had launched the inn into panic.

Everyone was ranting and raving, yelling about who would kiss her, or wanting to drink more, or wanting to go home.

It quickly dissolved into total chaos.

...Well, one way or another, this all started with me...

What can I do to take control over the situation? I was thinking it over as I watched them make a fuss.

“Don’t get near that corpse!”

Just as I took a dive into the ocean of my own thoughts, somebody else raised their voice. Everyone’s eyes went wide with surprise.

“What we have here is a murder! That corpse is important evidence. Back away!”

Standing there was a fresh-faced young man wearing a trench coat.

He held his hunting cap aloft, booming at us. “Oh, I suppose I ought to tell you all—I am a detective of some great repute, and I am here to solve this murder with all due speed and precision.”

.....

Uh-oh, this might spell trouble, I thought to myself.



Well then, before I continue the story, allow me to recount the events of the day the murder took place. Perhaps there are some hints as to the identity of the perpetrator hidden in there.

I suppose everything started around noon.

“An inn in a place like this...?”

In the course of my travels, I had stumbled across an inn in the middle of a forest and was staring up at its palatial exterior. It was situated deep in the forest, with nothing but trees on all sides, so I’m sure I was wearing a very puzzled expression.

It was so odd that I was convinced the inn must be abandoned, even as I headed for the front door. I was expecting I would be able to squat there just for the night.

“Ah, welcome!”

When the manager came out to meet me, I clicked my tongue loudly in surprise.

What's this? They're in operation?

"Can I stay here?"

"But of course! In fact, you're our seventh guest of the day!"

"....." I got my first look at the inside of the place. The interior was splendidly appointed. It looked more like a palace than an inn. Maybe the owners had kept it just as they had found it. "In this huge inn, there are only seven customers...?"

I was somewhat concerned as to whether I should stay or not.

Since they were operating in such a remote location, I could guess business wasn't booming. In that case, they must have charged their customers exorbitant fees, and there was a possibility that extra expenses would show up on the bill.

"....." *It would probably be best to seize the initiative and hurry out of here.* "I'm sorry—," I began.

"By the way, if you book now, we can ready the finest quality room at a discount."

"—I'll be staying, then."

And so I ended up staying for the night.

Sure enough, they gave me a sumptuous room for a very reasonable price; the manager had certainly spoken the truth. The room I was shown looked fit for royalty. A chandelier, emblematic of riches, hung from the center of the ceiling over a mysterious-looking canopy bed. Every inch of the huge, formidable furniture was lavishly decorated. There was also a vase for no reason, which was placed on a random stand. It looked like something you could get a lot of money for at a pawnshop.

"Hah-hah! So this is where I'm going to stay?"

An undiscovered treasure.

I lounged in my room until evening, when my stomach was suitably empty. Apparently, this inn even prepared some kind of dinner for guests, which for the price I found more than satisfactory. I had a keen hunch that there was a catch to all this but made a conscious decision not to worry about it too much.

Just as the sun was setting, the manager took the liberty of visiting my room and kindly told me that dinner had been prepared.

As before, I followed the manager's lead and proceeded toward the dining hall, where I first met the other guests.

Seated far apart from each other at a long, thin table, every one of them looked like a person harboring some sort of dark secret.

I sat down across from a girl who had the look of a traveler. What had been prepared for dinner was a mysterious soup, a mysterious salad, and a mysterious meat. When I say it like that, it sounds like the meal was shrouded in mystery, but when I tried some of the food, it was all surprisingly unsurprising.

"Say, are you a witch?"

As I was digging into my salad, the girl sitting in front of me suddenly leaned over in curiosity. Her gaze had fallen on the star-shaped brooch pinned to my breast.

"I am." I puffed my chest out a bit.

"Wow. That's amazing. You look even younger than me." At this point, the girl extended her hand across the table to me. "I'm Marie. Nice to meet you!"

"The pleasure's all mine. I'm Elaina. A traveling witch." I gripped her hand as I continued to chew, because I'm a bad girl with bad manners.

When we finished our greetings, the girl suddenly lowered her voice. "By the way, Miss Witch, which of the men over there is your type?"

"Huh?"

"Look here. There are four men huddled together in those seats over there. Which do you fancy?"

"....."

In the direction Marie was pointing, there was an edgy girl (I had already nicknamed her Goth Girl) eating by herself. Beyond her was a very clearly intoxicated woman who was ignoring her food in favor of more booze—and beyond *her* were the four men who were sitting and eating together.

“The man sitting farthest away, with the darker skin, is—”

“Right.”

Remembering names was a pain, so I had decided to call him Mr. Tan Man.

“Sitting across from him is this inn’s manager, his name is—”

Mr. Manager, yes, I see.

“Closer to us on the right, the man acting a little suspiciously is—”

Mr. Sketchy.

“And, on the left, the wonderful young hunk of a man with the fantastic personality is—”

Mr. Hunky, got it.

“Who do you think is best? I really like the hot guy, but...”

“.....” *Why did this girl suddenly start checking out the guys?* “I’m not really interested in any of them.”

“Huh? The hot guy is the only really good one out of all of them, isn’t he? All the others are past their prime or really weird or just plain old. I think the only one you would be happy marrying is the hunk.”

“.....”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. I’m traveling to find my ideal boyfriend, and the hot guy over there is my current boyfriend.”

“.....”

Just wanted to brag about your boyfriend, huh? I cringed, knowing she went out of her way to put down the other three men just to brag about her man. *What are you? The type of beautiful girl who stands next to ugly people to make yourself look better?*

“But he’s sitting over there, talking with the other men. Not with you.”

From what I could see, Mr. Hunky seemed to be having a friendly meal with the other three men sitting at his table. Shouldn’t he be eating with his girlfriend?

Marie's face suddenly clouded over when I pointed this out. "That's right... That's a problem."

"Sigh..." I could sense right away that this might turn into a long story and exhaled when I realized what was coming.

I would have liked to request that she keep it brief.

"Say, what do you think, Elaina? It's been about two months since we started dating, but he hasn't made a move on me no matter how much time passes. I can practically feel his gaze on my chest and butt, but he hasn't given the slightest indication that he intends to make a move. Not to mention he's only kissed me on the hand so far. What do you make of this?"

"Break up with that unreliable man right away! Obviously!"

That wasn't me talking just now.

"....."

"....."

For some reason, the drunk woman had taken a seat at our table and butt into our conversation while continuing to take swigs from her bottle.

Along with her came the smell of alcohol and Goth Girl, completing the set.

I could really do without the bonus add-ons...

"...An illicit affair...related to apples... Sacrilege..."

Goth Girl seemed to be a member of some kind of apple-based religion.

Drunk Lady had sat down with a *thunk* next to Marie, clapping her firmly on the shoulders. "Hey listen, that sucks! Drink up and forget about it! For now, just have a sip? Hey!"

Then she poured a glass of sake for Marie, making strange sound effects like "woot" and "ay-yo." Marie didn't seem to like the idea at first, but Drunk Lady chipped away at her resolve, and she quickly gave in and had a drink.

Less than an hour later, the two of them were completely sloshed.

"I can't do it anymore! Why doesn't he make a move on me? I'm sure I'm leaving him plenty of chances! Nothing but opportunities! Make a move! Come

on!” Marie had snapped.

“I hear ya. Men are so dense. They haven’t got a clue unless you say, ‘I’m waiting!’”

After that, a conversation unfolded between the two drunken parties that I don’t think would be worth repeating here.

“.....”

“.....”

“...Do you have any interest in apples? In this region, there’s a certain legend about apples, you know. To tell you about it would take some time, but—”

“.....”

Incidentally, sitting across from the two drunk women was a pitiful witch who was being solicited into joining a strange fruit-based religion.

Who could that be?

That’s right. She’s me.

“—and then apples bestowed humans with their intellect and became regarded as a sacred food. A certain famous scholar even got a hint for explaining the true nature of our world when he was hit on the head by a falling apple. Do you know what that means? Yes, it means that apples have led humans to great feats. Our world was built on apples. The whole world is an apple. I’m traveling around the world to look at apples, and I’m so happy I could die—”

“.....”

I think at this point, my eyes were so dead with boredom that I looked like a corpse.



“...And that’s the story of what’s happened from this morning until now.”

After making a sudden appearance, the detective had asked us to “*Please start with the events of the day on which the murder occurred,*” so I had taken the lead and told him, as the last person to arrive in the room.

By the way, regarding this great detective—

“You’re Marie’s boyfriend, right? What’s the deal with that outfit?”

“You’re wrong. I am a famous detective. I have no relation to the victim.”

“.....”

“I am a famous detective.”

Really playing the role, huh?

I was getting tired of this exchange, so I gave up on pressing him any further. Sleeping dogs and all that.

“B-but hey...Mr. Detective. You can tell from that story, can’t you? This wasn’t a murder or anything. I mean, nobody here had any reason to do it, did they?” said Mr. Sketchy, who had protested his innocence so vehemently that he may as well have said he was the culprit.

The great detective shook his head.

“That’s not necessarily true. The victim and her boyfriend were staying at this inn together, right? The boyfriend was accompanying the beautiful victim. In other words, one can easily imagine our perpetrator becoming obsessed with the victim and resenting her.”

Really?

“In that case, wouldn’t the boyfriend be the suspect?”

“That’s not necessarily true.” The great detective looked down his nose at me. “There’s a possibility that the perpetrator decided, *I’d rather kill her than see her date another man.*”

He seemed to have a point.

Drunk Lady suddenly raised her hand. “Which means that the victim was done in by a man, right? So I can go back to my room? I don’t wanna hang around in a place that could be sheltering a murderer,” she said, plainly concerned with saving her own skin.

“That’s not necessarily true.”

I wasn’t all that bothered myself, but whenever he said that line, his

expression turned arrogant, which got under my skin.

“Look at Goth Girl’s eyes.”

His gaze was turned toward Goth Girl, who was still standing over Marie’s corpse.

“The sleeping princess, sent to her eternal slumber by a poisoned apple... Nice... Ha-ha-ha... So cute...”

Her face was tinged red, and her breathing was ragged as if she had just sprinted, and on top of that, she was clearly drooling.

She made Mr. Sketchy look trustworthy.

“W-well... I suppose that means that women can be suspects, too.” Even the great detective had pulled away from her.

“...Can’t you just call her the culprit already?”

Drunk Lady was obviously awakening from her stupor.

Goth Girl’s suspicious behavior was deemed cause enough to detain her for questioning. The detective returned the other people to their rooms for the time being “Under no circumstances should you open your doors!” he reminded. “Absolutely not, you hear?” he emphasized. “Never!” he added for good measure, so they would probably stay shut up in their rooms no matter what happened.

“What’s your name?”

We had converted the dining room into an interrogation cell. The great detective, seated across from Goth Girl, fixed her in his unsparing gaze.

Incidentally, I was accompanying the great detective. If Goth Girl tried anything funny, I would be able to quickly gain control of the situation.

“——” She muttered her own name. It’s a pain to remember, so I’ll keep calling her Goth Girl.

With his arms folded, the great detective cast a sharp glance at her. “I’ll ask you directly. Are you the one who laid out that poisoned apple?”

“...No, I’m not. I believe in apples from the bottom of my heart, but I don’t

walk around carrying bunches of them...”

“Liar. There’s no one else here besides you who would bring apples with them. Plus there’s the other issue. Are you trying to say the victim went out of her way to eat it all on her own? There’s no way that would happen. Which means you’re the culprit.”

It was total speculation. I was shocked hearing the great detective talk. Better to call the detective defective.

“...You’re wrong. First of all...you’ve got the wrong idea...”

“What did you say?”

At this point, Goth Girl let out a long sigh.

Oh, I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

“—First, I may be a devout believer who loves apples from the bottom of my heart, but for that very reason, I have the dilemma of not being able to eat apples. I’m sure you understand why. One reason is that apples are far too sacred to be eaten by common folk. What religion do you practice? You must have something you believe in, right? For example, if you were told to eat an image of your god, could you? I don’t think you could. See what I mean?”

I had stopped listening halfway through, but to make a long story short, she clearly wasn’t walking around with any apples.

“.....”

“.....”

We had accidentally proven the innocence of our most promising suspect.

Who could have laid out that poisoned apple?

If only we knew that, we’d be able to apprehend the culprit in no time.

“Tch...in that case, who is suspicious...?” The great detective was in very low spirits after failing to get a confession out of Goth Girl. As he sat tracing his finger across the dining room table, the detective’s eyes lit up as something flashed into his mind.

“Wait a second...? That’s right! Dining hall...dinner—the one serving meals at

the inn...! That means that the person who prepares food for the dining hall is the most suspicious, doesn't it...?"

It was an impressively mediocre idea.

I was sure he's going to pull the cook in for questioning next, and I was also sure it was not going to lead anywhere, either.

What an unreliable detective.

The murder investigation had run aground, and I was starting to get fed up with the make-believe farce of this great detective.

"AAAAAAAAAAAH!"

That's when a shriek rang out.

I don't suppose that's the news that a second murder has taken place—

"....."

Not that I really care, but is there some rule that the employees always have to be first to discover the bodies?

○

"...Uhhh, she was already like this when I saw her..."

"This is really awful..."

"It w-wasn't me! I was in my room the whole time!"

"It's the curse of the apples..."

"Please calm down!"

A crowd had gathered around the latest victim, sprawled out on the ground.

The new victim—Drunk Lady—was lying limply on her side. Next to her was a large bottle of sake. There were no marks from blunt force trauma and no signs of a struggle, but a nasty-colored liquid was dribbling from her mouth.

How on earth had she ended up like this?

Once again, an employee had been the first to discover the body, and she explained the situation.

"...Um, I was patrolling the area to see whether there was anyone suspicious

around, but...when I passed by this spot, I heard sounds coming from her room... They were really violent sounds, so I thought maybe she was being attacked... But she was already...ohhh..."

She broke into tears.

"Let's get the circumstances straight." The great detective moved on without making any attempt to console the girl.

What an awful guy.

"Take a look at the victim's surroundings. There's a large sake bottle lying here. Also, there's some kind of thick liquid spewing from the drunk woman's mouth... There's only one conclusion we can draw from these circumstances. That's right, it's a deadly poison. It seems we have another incident on our hands with the same culprit as the apple poisoning."

"....."

Um, no. There's just no way.

"This is just ordinary sake, isn't it?"

There was a large bottle beside her. The stuff spilling from her mouth was vomit. And she was lying limply on the ground.

To put it clearly and concisely, Drunk Lady had too much to drink and passed out. *Isn't passing out pretty serious? Well, she seems to be breathing normally. She's even snoring. She's not dead. Just unconscious. She probably fell to the floor, puked, and then blacked out.*

...I hope I'm not like her when I'm older, I thought.

"There's no doubt this sake bottle was spiked with a deadly poison!" exclaimed the great detective.

"No, she just drank too much," I insisted.

"This sake bottle is an important piece of evidence! Don't touch it!"

"I just told you, she had too much to drink. Are you an idiot?"

"Slurp... Yes indeed, it is a most deadly poison!"

"It's just sake."

You're telling me that you just tasted poison and you're still okay somehow? Also, how do you know what poison tastes like anyway? And what on earth are you thinking, contaminating the crime scene?

Well, it's just ordinary alcohol.

"Oh, I can't tell the ingredients from such a small sample... Let me drink a little more..."

The capricious detective gripped the sake bottle and took another big swig. Alas, he shared an indirect kiss with Drunk Lady.

"...Heh-heh-heh. As I thought, this is poison...!"

"You sure seem happy to be poisoning yourself."

"I have an immunity."

"....."

I decided it wasn't worth arguing with him.

Go ahead and do what you like.

"...All right, the next step is to eat the poisoned apple. That might contain the very same poison."

The very red-faced detective left the room, still sipping from the bottle.

He must have been unsatisfied with Drunk Lady. He was plotting to share an indirect kiss with Marie, too.

.....

I hate this...

"Right, so I will now taste this poisoned apple," the great detective announced, holding the fruit up after returning from the lounge.

Apparently, he was not the only one interested in it.

"No, wait a moment. I was the first to lay eyes on it. That means I have the right to eat it." Mr. Tan Man grabbed the apple.

"W-wait...! I'll do it! If it really is poisoned, you'll die. I'll be fine. I've got a death wish." Mr. Sketchy also grabbed it, spewing some nonsense.

“Now, now, gentlemen. Calm down. I’m the oldest one here, so I should do it.” The foppish manager grabbed the apple.

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

Then the four of them stared at each other wordlessly for a moment.

“Don’t joke around! I’m the great detective! I’m going to eat the poison apple!”

“You say that, but I bet you just want to get an indirect kiss! Stop messing around!”

“T-that’s right! And you already drank from the sake bottle, too!”

“Now, now, everyone. Calm down. I’ll do it.”

“No, I will.”

“I will.”

“I-I’ll do it!”

“No, me.”

The unseemly men squabbled over the little apple. It was probably the most vulgar argument the world had ever seen. No doubt about it.

“What are they doing to that sacred apple...?” Goth Girl was indignant at the spectacle.

“...Enough already...I want to go home...” The employee was still crying.

“...Bleeeeeehhh...” Incidentally, Drunk Lady had just regained consciousness, leaning against me as she emptied the contents of her stomach. She was probably sickened by the terrible display taking place before her eyes.

The argument grew more and more heated.

The first one to make a move was Mr. Tan Man. He was well built. Driven by passion, he wrenched the apple away from the other three and bit into it.

“Uagh!” Mr. Tan Man collapsed. The apple rolled away. However, he hadn’t fulfilled his desire for an indirect kiss. Instead, there were now two bite marks.

Mr. Sketchy was the quickest to pick up the apple. “Wh-which one...?” He hesitated between the two bite marks. “Th-that’s right! The smaller one must be the spot where the girl ate from!” He went for the smaller bite. “Oh no...!” His knees buckled under him and he collapsed in despair. The apple rolled away.

“How could this be...?! Which is it...?!” When the manager picked up the apple, the two bite marks were now the same size. There was no longer a distinction to be made. “I choose death over sharing an indirect kiss with another man!” In the end, the manager bit into the red fruit in an entirely new spot. “Wait...this...is meaningless...!”

He realized too late. The manager also fell to the ground.

Having defeated his three rivals, the great detective threw the poison apple away. “Phew...what an idiotic bunch. They didn’t even realize that this was all part of my scheme!”

It seemed his mind had taken a strange turn on account of his drunkenness. Having drained the bottle dry, he tossed it to the side. Drunk Lady threw up again.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Now the case is mine!”

This is where the great detective exposed his true nature.

“So, I don’t suppose Marie will awaken until I give her a wakening kiss, right? That’s right, isn’t it, Goth Girl?!”

“...Yeah.” She nodded, raising her eyebrows in surprise at being called this nickname.

“Which means that until I kiss her, she won’t wake up. Score!”

Apparently, he got really weird when he got drunk. The great detective, completely forgetting himself, sat down next to the girl.

And then he placed a hand on Marie’s clothing.

“Uagh!”

“...He must not...even register that we’re here...”

“Bleeeeeeeagh.”

Marie had been troubled because her boyfriend never made a move, but I was certain she wouldn’t want to be touched in this fashion.

Looks like I’d better get in there and stop this—

“...Hiya.” I had taken out my wand.

“Don’t touch me. I’ll kill you.”

Marie sat up, caving in the man’s face with a beautiful right hook. There was a dull crunching sound, and then blood sprayed through the air.

The great detective collapsed.

“...Scum.”

She looked down at the great detective laid out on the floor, blood gushing from his nose.

“.....”

And as for the poisoned apple, the key to this whole incident?

Who on earth was the culprit that planted it?

That’s right. She’s me.



“Say, Elaina? Do you think you could make an apple into a poisoned one?”

After dinner, Marie had made a special visit to my room to ask me this question.

“You see, there’s the Legend of the Apples in this region, and—”

She told me a very romantic story.

A maiden of the forest was compelled by an evil witch to eat a poisoned apple and fell into an eternal sleep, but she was awakened by a kiss from a prince and lived happily ever after.

Well, the truth was that the prince was a necrophile.

“So you see, I want to try to imitate that legend!”

“Huh...” *To summarize...* “You want to get a kiss from your boyfriend to wake you from eternal sleep after I trick you into eating a poisoned apple?”

“Exactly!”

“Sounds like a hassle...”

“Oh, come on! Please, Miss Witch!”

“.....”

It was quite a drastic measure to make a sheepish man interested, but I supposed there was no other way.

However, there wasn’t anything in it for me.

I wasn’t so generous that I’d gleefully play a role in this stupid farce. How can I reject her proposal with poise and grace...?

“Um, I’m very sorry, but—”

“If you help me, I’ll give you a gold coin.”

“Let’s do it.”

In this way, I became Marie’s coconspirator.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t exactly conjure up a poison that would kill her and then allow her to be revived by a kiss from a prince. Also, she had demanded that she be conscious the entire time. So I ended up placing a spell on the apple that would paralyze her as soon as she ate it, until I broke the spell.

Then I had her eat the apple in the lounge, which was the most public place in the inn, and we waited for someone to find her and for the commotion to start.

That was the plan.

Fortunately for us, we had a true apple lover, Goth Girl, staying with us at the inn. We thought once we set things in motion, Marie’s boyfriend would plant his lips on hers, but...

“...I never thought he would appear in a detective costume.”

It went far beyond expectations. For someone who had never even made a

move, he certainly got carried away, steamrolling right past a quick peck to make a spectacle.

Which is to say, Marie's boyfriend was a real idiot.

"Let's break up... I can't believe you..."

Marie spit on him—*gross*.

After all that, Mr. Tan Man, Mr. Sketchy, and Mr. Manager all woke up, caught sight of Marie, and shouted in surprise as they sprinted in all directions.

"Ahhh! The dead lives again!"

The great detective boyfriend stayed unconscious. *Well, I'm sure he'll wake up sooner or later.*

"Hey, could you go ahead and rent me another room? I hate the idea of staying in the same room as him."

"Of course."

The employee nodded at Marie and handed her the key to a new room. We all decided it was time to leave the lounge.

Oh, by the way, we left the detective where he was.

"*Sigh...* I thought he was a sheep, but he was really a wolf in sheep's clothing, huh? I'm done with him."

"A wolf in sheep's clothing?"

"Seems harmless until provoked."

I see...a phrase I will probably forget by tomorrow.

"Appearances sure can be deceiving. I never thought he was like that."

Marie shrugged in resignation.

I looked back at her as I opened the door to my room.

"Just like poisoned apples."



CHAPTER 5

Trivial Stories

Food to Impress a Gourmand

In a certain country lived an impertinent epicure.

“Not to brag, but I’ve eaten every type of cuisine in the world. To be frank, I don’t suppose there is a man on earth who knows as much about food as I do.”

The epicure invited top-notch chefs to his stately mansion night after night for parties. Ragers, every day. He would call over guests for these nightly socials. For such a self-styled epicure, he seemed to have an insatiable appetite for *something*, because he had a habit of generously inviting young girls to attend the parties for free.

“How about it, Miss Witch? Are you enjoying yourself?”

Enticed by the free meal, I had agreed to attend one such party, where I had devoured the handiwork of many famous chefs.

“Yes. Quite so. I’m very satisfied.”

“Glad to hear that.” The gourmand was wearing a suit of excellent quality, and his voice was full of self-assurance. “By the way, I hear you are a traveling witch. What do you think? Is there anything greater than the food here? I can’t imagine there could be.”

“Uh-huh...”

“Nothing comes to mind, right?”

“Well, I don’t suppose so.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

If the meal’s free, I’ll keep my minor complaints to myself. Though they say there’s nothing more expensive than something free—and listening to this guy carry on, I’d say this is the most expensive meal in the world! But exorbitant prices don’t make something great.

“—Ah, hey! You there! What are you doing? What’s with this plating? Have you no respect for food?”

Whenever there was a lull in the party, the epicure would issue instructions to the chefs that bordered on abuse.

“Hey, little girl! That’s not the ideal way to eat that dish! Get out of here, you ignorant child!” Sometimes his harsh words didn’t stop with the chefs but extended to the guests.

I was no exception, as earlier he had seen me spread butter on top of bread and confiscated it, saying, “If you use that much butter, you won’t be able to enjoy the taste of the bread itself!”

Now the gourmand seemed to have calmed down, wearing a peaceful expression as he swirled his wineglass.

“Geez... Don’t you think there are far too many people who don’t understand anything about food? Well, you’ve got a bit of that tendency, too, I suppose.”

“Uh-huh...”

“I’m happy that you can sample these offerings and have a little taste of fine dining. It might be hard to start up your travels again with your newly refined palate.”

“That would be troublesome.”

“I’m sure. It’s not such a happy thing, you see. Since I’ve eaten so much haute cuisine, nothing really surprises me anymore.”

Oh, the luxury to have such a problem.

The epicure sighed. “Oh, I wonder if there isn’t someone somewhere who can make a dish that will impress me? If there was such a person, I would pay a great sum to be allowed to eat—”

Someone who can make food to impress the impertinent epicure, huh?

I hear you.

“In that case, I know someone who can do it.”

“Oh? Who would that be?”

That's right.

"It's me."

A Novel to Captivate a Bookworm

In a certain country lived an impertinent bookworm.

He had read every kind of book in the world and made his living as a literary critic. He was a plump old man living a comfortable and secluded life in his stately mansion.

"I heard that you, the traveling witch, caused that cheeky young epicure to cease holding his famous dinner parties altogether. Is that the truth?"

On that particular day, I had been invited to the residence of that particular bookworm, where he made such an inquiry of me.

"Where did you hear that story?"

According to the rumors, the epicure had ceased his nightly parties after eating the greatest dish, prepared by me, and stopped sharing amazing cuisine with other people.

As a result, I had made enemies of the many girls in this country who had been enjoying the free meals. Well, these things do happen.

"One of the employees working here now was originally a maid who had worked at that estate. That's where she heard about you. Just what kind of sleight of hand did you use to satisfy that youngster? I'm told he was quite vocal about culinary matters."

"If you want to know so badly, why not ask your maid?"

"I did, but she didn't really know. That's why I invited you here. Get my imagination going."

"....."

He's awfully arrogant.

"But why do you want to know? Or do I have to use my imagination to find that answer, too?"

"Hmm. Take a guess," he said, puffing away on his pipe from atop his chair.

He's got an ego.

Apparently, it was too much of a bother for this old man, who was enjoying his reclusive life shut up in his study, surrounded by a bunch of books, to move his mouth and tell his own stories.

Well, that wasn't too hard to imagine.

"You've spent your life reading many interesting stories and tales, but now you're very, very bored, and you summoned me here because you want to hear an interesting story, right?"

"Oh... That's right." The bookworm raised an eyebrow. "I've grown tired of recent novels; not a single one of them is of any import. Compared to classical literature, popular fiction is nothing, nothing at all. Many new books are published every month, but none of them strike a chord with me. They're all dreadfully dull. That's why I've grown so bored."

"I bet."

"How do you know?"

"How about I get your imagination going again?"

Well, in actual fact, the bookworm and the epicure were just two birds of a feather.

"If you're that bored, then if you like, tomorrow I'll come here and bring a novel that you'll want to tell someone about right away. If I do that, I think you'll understand why the epicure stopped holding his dinners."

"Oh...how interesting. So you're saying that you're going to inspire me to shut myself away in my estate like the epicure?"

"I wouldn't be so sure."

"Why not?"

"I think you should know, even without using your imagination."

You're already a recluse.

And so, on the following day, I brought a single book to the bookworm's house.

“Please read this to the end. I’m sure you’ll want to tell someone about it right away,” I said and left.

It took three days before the bookworm’s maid hesitantly came to visit me at the inn where I was staying. “Um...the master has summoned you to come at once...”

The bookworm was waiting for me at his estate, wearing a rather twisted expression. “What is the meaning of this?” He slammed the book down on the table.

What a horrid way to treat a book, for a bookworm, I thought as I stared at him. But when I looked closely, it was the one I had given to him several days earlier.

It seemed he was dissatisfied with my book.

“What on earth is this? It had no themes to speak of, and there’s absolutely no structure to the writing. It’s just the everyday conversations of ordinary people, repeated over and over again! There’s nothing that could even remotely be called foreshadowing. The characters possess no qualities that are charming. This is the first book I’ve ever read that had me in agony from line three!”

“.....”

By the way, the book did not have a title. It was someone’s personal novel that I had happened to find at a general store in some out-of-the-way country somewhere. The contents were definitely hot garbage.

I was the one who had given him the book, but in actuality, the novel had been so boring that I had absolutely no recollection of the contents. However, I did remember that immediately after I finished reading—a feat of not inconsiderable willpower—I had felt an inestimable sense of indignation. If I remember correctly, I think I put in my best effort and finished reading the book in about three hours, but thinking back on it, those must have been the most pointless three hours of my entire life.

On the other hand, it had apparently taken three days for the bookworm to finish, so he must have now been fuming over the most pointless three days of

his life.

“I read it over and over, thinking I must have skipped over some interesting scene, but this is, without a doubt, a steaming load! Why did you give me something like this? I don’t recall asking for such a boring story.”

He was rather angry.

It had been the same with the epicure.

A smile spread across my face. I said the same thing I had told the gourmand after he had finished eating a meal that was *impressively* bad.

“But didn’t it make you want to tell someone about it?”



CHAPTER 6

The Sunken City

A single witch was sitting atop her broom, weaving among the gaps in the trees as she proceeded through the forest.

Sunlight filtered through the canopy overhead, twinkling like a starry sky.

However, just as the warmth of the stars floating in the night sky does not reach the earth below, the interior of the forest was as dim as midnight. Very little of the light spilling from the heavens above reached the witch beneath the boughs. Its brilliance was reserved for the space above the forest.

So for that reason, even though it was early spring, the witch was a little chilly and hugged her own shoulders as she made her way through the forest.

She was a young witch, clad in a black robe and pointy black hat. She appeared to be in her late teens. Her hair was long, not white nor black but an ashen color, and it flowed gently in the breeze. Her lapis-colored eyes were scanning the gloomy forest.

Entry beyond this point is...

In this forest with no signs of other people, she saw a barely surviving vestige of human activity.

She had stopped in her tracks to read the sign that must have formerly had ENTRY PROHIBITED written on it—but the letters were blurred, and the signboard had ivy curling all around it. It looked like it had finished its duties long ago.

The witch acted as if she had never seen the sign and charged ahead on her broom. She would have continued on her way even if the sign had been intact.

“.....”

She was a rotten witch who would blatantly ignore the rules to get forgiveness instead of permission by feigning ignorance, like “*Ah, I’m so sorry! I didn’t know!*” Who on earth could she be?

That’s right. She’s me.

“.....”

I wasn't particularly forging through the forest because I was aiming for something on the other side of the forest.

I had simply seen a similar sign to the one I just saw at the entrance—one that had ENTRY BEYOND THIS POINT IS FORBIDDEN written on it. I had puzzled over it because it had fallen on the ground, which piqued my interest, and I entered the forest.

I had no good reason to be there. It wasn't like there was something I felt I had to see or anything like that. And if there was nothing here, I could just go back the way I came.

And so I continued on for a while in a daze, gazing up at the forest canopy and yawning as I went.

I could see light shining through the gaps in the trees.

Is it finally over? That was a long trip.

As these thoughts were circling my mind, I headed toward the light, but—

“—You. Stop.”

Immediately as I left the forest, every bit of ground I could see was covered in swords. Innumerable swords, all stock-still and pointed in my direction.

“...Huh?”

Reflexively, I raised both hands. I offered my surrender while I still had no idea what was going on.

Before my eyes was a lone girl, glaring at me with eyes as sharp as the blades themselves.

Beautiful black hair hung down out of the pointy hat she wore on her head. Her skin was darkly tanned, and her eyes were light blue like the ocean in spring. Her clothing was odd. I'm sure she was wearing a pointy hat and robe, but under the robe, she was quite exposed: her stomach and thighs were completely bare. If she had taken off her robe, there would be nothing stopping you from saying she was pretty much in her underwear.

Won't you get sick dressed like that this time of year?

“You’re the one who has been invading our territory lately, right?”

“No I’m not.”

“Liar. I can smell the lies on you. You reek of lies.”

“No way.” I sniffed at my robe, but it just had the nice scent of fresh laundry.

“Why did you come to this country? You came to attack us, didn’t you?”

“Oh, is this a country?”

Even though there’s no wall or gate or anything?

With both hands still raised, I leaned to the side briefly and looked beyond the girl.

.....

“...Well.”

There I saw a very strange yet wonderful scene stretching out.

A city submerged in water.

There was a sea of deep blue that looked like it would suck you right in, spreading out from the edge of the forest. Buildings broke through the calm surface of the water. There were towers of all sizes that looked like they had welled up from the depths, as well as many smaller dwellings that drifted across the surface. In the shallows grew crooked trees, roots half submerged.

The place where the girl was standing before me seemed to be the coast. Watching the shimmering water gently lapping at her bare, brown legs brought me back to the moment.

Next to her, there was a small boat swaying with the waves, rocking about amusingly. There were fish inside a net in the boat, as though she had just come back from a fishing trip, and they were sloshing around, too.

At any rate, it seemed I had arrived at an underwater city.

But since I was apparently the subject of some kind of strange misunderstanding, I said, “I’m not a suspicious person, you see? Look at this brooch. I’m a witch.” I held out the breast of my robe, showing it proudly to the girl.

“A witch? Never heard of it. Can you eat that...thing?”

“.....”

Huh?

“It’s got a delicious-looking shape...”

“.....”

Oh, there’s no use talking to her.

I quickly gave up on us understanding each other. I threw in the towel on any hope of communication.

“You’re suspicious. I’m taking you with me.”

Eventually, the girl yanked me by the arm, pulled me into the small boat, and took me along with her to the city. But before we launched, she tied my arms with a rope. It was very loose.

.....

I took an optimistic view.

Well, I suppose everything will work out somehow just as soon as we meet someone I can talk to.

As thoughts like that circled my mind, the small boat glided across the water.

“...Nngh! Oof!”

By the way, the girl was rowing, her arms shaking as she propelled the small boat forward.

...Couldn’t you just use magic?



“Pops! I found a shady woman!”

We had been drifting over the water for some time.

The girl had taken me to the tallest tower, where she slammed open an oddly placed door and shouted in a loud voice.

Inside was fairly spacious, but the lovely white ceiling was low enough to reach with your hands, maybe because the structure had not originally been

designed as a residence. The floor was made of simple slats of wood. They had a rather rustic appearance, like they would warp if you stepped hard on them.

“...Huh.”

Deeper inside, sitting on a handmade wooden chair, was a dashing-looking older man with a dark brown complexion.

“What’s this? Another attack from the city?” the older man asked.

By the way, he was mostly nude. For clothing, he wore only a single piece of cloth wound around his hips.

Aren’t you cold? Are your muscles protecting your body from the cold? Is that possible?

The girl tugged roughly on my arm as I stood there shocked. “Here! This person! Very shady! She looks super suspicious!”

“I’m not all that suspicious, actually.”

As if such a clarification from me had hardly any effect, the dashing man stood up. “...Well, for now, just put her in jail. I’ll interrogate her later. Dinner comes first.”

...What’s with that lazy response?

“Sure! Got it! I’ll torture her!”

You mean “interrogate,” right?

In the end, I was dragged along at the mercy of the somewhat overenthusiastic girl.

The interior of the tower seemed to be rather spacious. On the second floor was a large prison cell. The girl tossed me into it, saying only, “You wait here, and be quiet!” and returned to the first floor. Incidentally, the chair in the cell was, as with everything else, made of wood.

“.....”

“.....”

There was one other person inside. Apparently, someone else had been arrested, same as me. I could see her in the corner of the cell.

“Were you arrested, too?”

It was an adult woman with something of a free-spirited yet refined manner about her.

Her age seemed to be about early twenties. Her soft blond hair was bound into a single bunch on the side of her head, and the ends of it brushed her shoulders. Her eyes were a bluish-purple color. They were framed by glasses with slim silver rims.

She was wearing clothes that made me wonder what on earth she normally did with her time—a dress and a shawl, like a city girl. She looked terribly out of place inside a cell like this.

“Hi there.” For the time being, I bowed in greeting.

The woman said “hello” with a grin. “My name is Viola. I’m a beautiful young archaeologist on an important journey.”

“.....” Well, I don’t know if you should call yourself young...

“Oh, the ‘beautiful young archaeologist’ thing was a joke, oh-hoh-hoh!” Viola elegantly brought her hand to her mouth. “What is your name, Miss Witch?”

“Ah, I’m Elaina. I’m a traveling witch.”

“My, a cute traveler with a cute name!”

“Th-thanks...”

I sat down in the very center of the jail cell, and for some reason, Viola stood right up and sat down again next to me.

“.....” Suddenly face-to-face, I felt somehow vaguely uncomfortable.

“Um, what on earth is the deal with this country?” I asked while trying to put a little distance between us.

Viola laughed again. “This place is called Sunken City!” She closed the distance between us once again.

“Sunken City, huh...? I’ve never heard of it.” I inched away in irritation, only as far as she had approached.

“That’s because only the people who live here call it that.” Viola scooted that

much closer. “The thing about this place, you see, is that it has a fairly sad history.”

“Uh-huh...” I backed away.

“Do you want to hear about it?” She closed in.

“Before you start, I think you’re a bit too close.”

“Oh, I don’t mind! I’ve been famous for having no sense of personal space ever since I was a kid.”

“Are you sure you aren’t infamous for trampling on other people’s personal boundaries?”

“I only want to get close to cute girls, so don’t worry, okay?”

“.....”

“Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh...” She idly brushed at her hair.

A chill went up my spine.

“.....!” With all my strength, I escaped to the edge of the cell and created a wall between her and me using my luggage.

I felt I was in danger.

What’s with this jail? The inside of the cell is more dangerous than the outside! There’s no rule of law in here! I’m so scared. I’m terrified. What should I do? I’d just as soon blast off some spells and get out of here.

I was trying to wrench free of the rope binding my hands.

“I brought food for you.”

The girl with tanned skin from earlier appeared, holding a plate loaded with salad in each hand. Since we were in a city on the water, I had naively thought they might serve us fish or other seafood.

But it seemed they served nothing but salad to criminals.

“...Humph! You can waste away eating nothing but leaves!” In an aggressive tone of voice, the girl set down the plates for a moment, strained to open the cell, and handed us the salad. “Yeah, here you go.” She left again.

Or so I thought. She came back once more, set down several varieties of bottles, said, “Here, salad dressing,” and left for real this time.

Her good upbringing revealed itself.

“That girl is called Atolie. She seems to be one of the few mages in this country. And she’s apparently the daughter of the patriarch.” Viola spoke while munching on leaves.

“The patriarch?”

Chomping away at her salad, Viola continued. “There was a mostly naked older man downstairs, right? That man is the chief of the tribe that lives in this city.”

“I see.” I nodded. Weird look for a patriarch.

“By the way, little Atolie is cute, isn’t she?”

“Uh, huh...well, sure...”

“Earlier, I said I was a beautiful young archaeologist on a journey, but the truth is I’m just a hobbyist. I’m trying to create an illustrated reference manual of beautiful girls.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand where this conversation is going.”

“Oh, come to think of it, there’s a reason why there are the remains of a sunken city here.”

“This discussion is all over the place.”

“Ah-hah!”

“.....”

Oh, there’s no use trying to talk to her.

But at any rate, I was admittedly a little interested in finding out how this city got to such a state, so I lent my ear to Viola.

“Oh, come to think of it—”

She went on.

The conversation continued to change again and again, but eventually she

told me a bit about this city's history.



Something had taken place when Viola had visited the Ancient Capital, Lolia, an ordinary city, in the middle of her travels.

"I am king of this country."

On the third day of her stay there, she had been summoned by the king.

"Oh, hello."

She was apparently rather nonchalant even when dealing with royalty.

"I've heard you're a traveling archaeologist... Is that true?"

"Yep. I'm a beautiful young archaeologist!"

"....."

"Ah, the 'beautiful young' part was a joke."

"...Is...is that so?" The king coughed and cleared his throat. "Well, there is something I would like to request of you."

"You want me to keep you company overnight? I'm afraid that won't be possible."

"Not that."

"I'm sorry, it's just that I don't want to form that kind of relationship with a man—"

"I said that's not it."

In great exasperation, the king leaned forward from where he sat on his splendid throne and began speaking seriously. "The truth is, our country has been troubled by food shortages..."

According to his story, his country's population had outgrown its ability to feed all its people. They had tried to import food from other countries, but it seemed their neighbors had found themselves in difficult circumstances. Even if they had been able to work out a deal, it would have been a drop in the bucket.

The king was at a complete loss.

“At that point, in order to procure food for my country, I thought we would develop new lands to supply us.”

“I see.”

“I sent out the army, conducted a survey of nearby regions, and found out there was a lake in the middle of the forbidden forest. Our soldiers quickly set all their efforts to fishing the lake, but...apparently there was a bit of a problem there.”

According to the king, they hadn't come across just any lake, but a submerged city where people were already living. The residents were awfully warlike and relentlessly attacked the king's soldiers. There was no way they would be able to harvest any fish.

“And so,” the king said, “I would like you to go to the city in the lake—to Sunken City—and have a conversation with those people. We want to avoid any more violence. So we'd like you to communicate with the native people of the lake.”

“.....”

“I take it this is not an unwelcome task for you, since you will be able to explore a rather new and undeveloped land.”

In summary, the task was nothing other than to risk her life by venturing alone and unarmed into a lawless land and convince the enemy to lay down their weapons. It was almost certainly a suicide mission.

Could there be any reason to take on a commission like this? It was a fool's errand. There was no way she could accept.

And so Viola shook her head.

“If you will go and do this for us, I shall pardon any previous indecent conduct and forgive you for hitting on all the girls in town.”

Then she nodded enthusiastically.

The following day, Viola arrived at Sunken City.

She had been arrested the same way as I had and thrown into jail, but after that, she was able to meet face-to-face with the patriarch to plead her case,

and he quickly set her free.

It seemed the people of Sunken City were rather sympathetic. Once they understood she was not an enemy, the people of the tribe completely changed their attitude toward her and welcomed her warmly. Atolie's father offered her his home-cooked fish, sprinkling the finishing touches of salt from high up, while his daughter Atolie performed a welcoming dance or something along those lines.

There, Viola told them her reason for coming to Sunken City. She didn't even eat the fish. She was probably too enthralled by Atolie's dancing.

The father nodded. "...Hmm."

Atolie puffed out her cheeks. "No way. They're the ones who came at us with hostility in the first place. That's why we killed them."

What's this? This is strange. Before we discuss this further, I think I should go back to Lolia and find out why the two stories are so different.

Apparently, that's what Viola was thinking, but the girl named Atolie was very cute, and Viola thought that since Atolie was so cute, she didn't really care what happened, so for the moment, she banished all thought of the task she had been commissioned to do into a corner of her mind.

In the end, she decided to remain in Sunken City under the pretext of conducting research. After all, she was an archaeologist and quite curious about the city.

The chief was rather pleased to hear her say so. "That's wonderful! There are all sorts of things we would like to know about our city in the water. At any rate, it sank into the lake long, long before any of us were born."

It sounded like the chief was fine not really knowing anything about the remains of the city at their feet, but he wouldn't mind learning about it.

Atolie cooperated with her research, applying a spell to prevent her from getting wet when she went underwater and even going under with her. She might have taken a liking for Viola.

Several days later, killing spare time in between diving with Atolie, Viola made

a pass at another girl, then went diving, then played around with another girl, then went diving, then played with another girl, then played with another girl, then played with another girl. Eventually, it got to the point where conducting her research on Sunken City was a side gig to her main occupation of fooling around with other girls. This woman was a true good-for-nothing. If she were a man, I think she would have been killed a hundred times over for sure.

Furthermore, since she was doing nothing but committing these blunders, she completely fell out of Atolie's favor. The girl began to treat her with contempt and fed her nothing but salad for every meal. Served her right.

Despite her behavior, Atolie still accompanied Viola on her underwater research trips.

That just goes to show the quality of her upbringing. Her speech is another matter, though.

In any case, after spending a number of days on research, Viola had reached one single conclusion: "There is no doubt that this city was submerged by human hands several centuries ago."

Viola spoke to the chief. "If I were to draw up the structure of the underwater city on a simple diagram, you would see this area was originally shaped like a deep pot. In other words, the people dug deep into the forest floor and built their city there—that is how the city used to look."

"Hmm... So what you're saying is water collected in the valley due to a great rainfall or something and drowned the city?"

Viola shook her head.

"No. That wouldn't be enough to submerge the city. It must have been due to magic. A mage conjured a huge quantity of water to drown this city. I don't know their motivation to do such a thing, but..."

"...I see." The chief was nodding along.

Viola quickly wrapped up her report. "I'll be leaving here tomorrow. I'm heading to the Ancient Capital, Lolia. There are a number of things I would like to confirm there. May I be allowed to stay here for another night?"

The chief nodded at this request, too. “Of course. Atolie has taken quite a liking to you. So much so that I would like you to stay forever.”

“*Oh-ho-ho!*” laughed Viola. “My, my...”

Behind her smile was a whirlwind of complicated emotions.

Because during her many sessions of underwater research with Atolie, she had seen one thing that did not bode well.

Something had been written on the wall of a private house in an ancient era: *This country sank because of a witch from the Ancient Capital, Lolita.*

Viola didn’t think Atolie had been able to read it, but Viola herself had clearly understood the words.

It was a message written for whoever might come along afterward.

Viola had had an uneasy feeling from the very beginning. Why were there people living in a region that was forbidden to enter? Why was the region forbidden in the first place? Why had Lolita dispatched an outsider like Viola? Why were there discrepancies between Atolie’s testimony and what the king had said?

It was possible the king had already known all about this place when he had commissioned Viola for the task.

And it was possible Lolita had some ulterior reason for forbidding people from entering the forest and finding the city.

Viola felt a vague air of worry surrounding her.

That was her story.

.....

Huh? Come again?

“Wait just a second, please. Why were you arrested?”

“*Oh-ho-ho!*” Viola laughed. “That was... Well, I’m in here because I snuck into Atolie’s bedroom last night.”

“.....”

What a dud, I thought to myself.



After spending a little more time in jail, we were eventually summoned by the chief and went downstairs.

Since the chief was someone who actually had the capacity to understand what I was saying, I told him about my circumstances.

He nodded. "...Hmm." He ordered Atolie, "Then there is no problem. Release her."

How easy...

This tribe was as forgiving as the rope that had been loosely wound around my hands a moment ago.

"Soldiers from a neighboring country have been violently intruding on our territory, you see. You can understand why we were suspicious. I don't make a hobby of recklessly arresting and interrogating people," said the chief.

Apparently, he was the only person here with his head on straight. Despite his appearance.

"I've heard the majority of your conversation in the jail from Atolie. It sounds like you are a traveling mage."

"Yes..."

I shot a quick glance at Atolie, and she swiftly turned her face away. *I suppose she was eavesdropping the whole time, huh... She must have a lot of time on her hands...*

"I had to collect your lunch plates, so I just stood watch. I only heard part of it," Atolie quickly explained.

"Allow me to get to the heart of the matter. As you understand from what the archaeologist told you, our territory is currently under attack by a nearby country. If the situation continues, there is a real possibility we will be destroyed. That lot likes to come threaten us without warning. We have no way of knowing when they might launch an all-out attack."

No matter how many mages like Atolie happened to be here, their enemy was

a modern nation with overwhelming military might. They wouldn't be able to match them, even with their best efforts.

That was something the chief seemed to fully understand. "And so I have a request to make of you two. I want you to go conduct reconciliation negotiations with those people."

"Reconciliation negotiations, you say..."

The chief nodded at me. "To be frank, even I am at quite a loss as to how we should solve this problem. I can't find a solution no matter how hard I try. The enemy is after food. But the fish are also a precious resource for us. There's no way we can simply hand them over. However, if we refuse, we're likely to be destroyed... It's hopeless."

"And you want to entrust that hopeless problem to the two of us."

"...Mm."

This is absurd.

It was possible we were better versed in the circumstances of the other country than the people who lived here. However, I didn't think I was the right person for such an important task, especially because if we failed, it could mean every person here would be facing extinction.

The burden was too heavy for me to bear.

"I see." Viola was there next to me, as nonchalant as ever.

For her part, she was keeping up appearances with a superficial smile, but I was sure that on the inside, she felt the same way as I did.

After all, she knew the history of the Ancient Capital, Lolita, which she hadn't yet disclosed to the chief and Atolie.

It was clear things were getting desperate.

She had nothing more to add, and if anything, she would probably be in danger if she were to shamelessly return to Lolita.

There was nothing to do but refuse.

"Can I trust you?"

In response to the chief's question, Viola nodded like it was a matter of course—

“Leave it to us!”

...She nodded in the affirmative.

.....*Excuse me?*

Indifferent to my shock, Viola seemed as dispassionate as ever. “However, I do have one request.”

In an ingratiating voice, she pleaded with the chief for just one thing.



The small boat swayed beneath the blue sky.

It was floating atop the deep blue water, frail enough that it seemed like it might suddenly flip right over if someone were to place a hand on one side and push hard enough.

Great pillars rose out of the water, and any number of small boats like this one were scattered around above Sunken City, among the residents' floating houses.

“...So what do you plan to do with the fish you catch?”

Next to me, the woman tossed the line dangling from her fishing rod into the water, then looked at me in confusion. “Hmm? What am I going to do? I'll take them over as gifts, of course!”

“...So then what do you plan to do with them after you take them over as gifts?”

“Get them to eat them, of course...?”

“.....”

Assuming there was no great falsehood in what she said, the people she was talking about had already destroyed this country once. What possible meaning could there be in paying tribute with fish?

Wasn't this really just extortion?

“Is there any point to that?”

“Well, kind of. Leave it to me, okay?” The woman handed me a fishing rod. She was probably trying to tell me to stop repeating myself and hurry up and catch some fish.

“.....”

I understood neither the meaning nor the purpose, but I forced myself to accept that she must have something in mind, and I fastened some bait onto my hook and tossed my line into the water.

The water formed gentle waves and swallowed up my bait without so much as a ripple.

Before long, the fish came biting at Viola’s line. When she noticed the tugging from below, she pulled up hard on the bowing rod and dropped a single large fish onto the deck of the small boat.

The fish was bright red, like it was sunburned.

“Apparently, this fish is tantamount to a staple food here,” Viola said as she flung the fish into a bucket. “They say these guys line the dinner tables of every home in the country. I hear they’re delicious no matter how they’re prepared, whether stewed or grilled or dried or fresh.”

You “hear”?

“Have you never eaten one yourself?”

“I’m always eating salad.”

A shrill flute sounded. When I turned to look in that direction, Atolie was there in the small boat just a short distance ahead of us, standing there levitating a large net in the air using magic, pointing her thumb downward, and waving it near her chest.

“...What is that she’s doing?”

Is it a provocation? An invitation? Hmm?

As I was thinking, she held her index finger up and began waving it in front of her face. I did not understand her meaning.

“Those are hand signs. She’s saying that there aren’t very many fish there, so

let's leave," Viola answered as she began to row the small boat.

At the same time, she winked at Atolie and blew her a kiss.

"...What was that hand sign for just now?"

"It means 'I love you'!"

"....."

In response, Atolie spit off the side of her boat. I think that was probably the sign for "*What? Ew.*"

After that, the girls let the hand signals fly between them.

Atolie put two fingers to her own throat, which Viola went out of her way to explain, "With that one she's saying 'Are you thirsty? Are you okay?'" and then returned the hand sign for "*Can I sleep with you tonight?*"

I don't get it...

Atolie got angry and signed, "*Gross. Hope you die,*" and Viola danced around euphorically and signed, "*Oh, come on! You're cute when you're embarrassed!*"

You're rocking the boat. Could you please stop?

In her spare moments between fishing, as she handled her net using magic, Atolie gamely replied to all of Viola's signs, even to things she could have ignored.

Is she serious?

From there, the battle of the hand signs continued until our bucket filled up with fish.

"Come on, Atolie, I love you! Let's get married."

"I know you say the same thing to all the other girls."

"When should we hold the ceremony? Let's have fish pie for our wedding cake."

"Sounds gross."

"How many children do you want?"

"None."

“Well! You mean you want to have all my love to yourself for the rest of our lives? Yay! I’ve got a selfish sweetheart!”

“Not exactly.”

“Where shall we have our honeymoon? A resort? An inn? Or maybe a hotel? What do you think about a hotel?”

“The mountains would be nice.”

“Oh, a wild one, huh?”

“Mm.”

“By the way, can I come to your room tonight?”

“You want to get thrown in jail again?”

“The only place I want to go in is your bed...”

“Gross. I hope you die.”

“Don’t worry! I would just sleep! Together with you! I really won’t try anything funny! Seriously! Despite how I look, I’m a real lady! I’m nothing like those other girls!”

“A lady wouldn’t say that she wants to sleep with a girl.”

“Women who don’t try to sleep with cute girls aren’t ladies.”

“Then what are you?”

“I have such little interest in the pleasures of the flesh that I’m practically vegan...I guess...”

“You don’t sound so sure, for someone who eats nothing but salad.”

“But you never let me eat anything else, isn’t that right...?”

.....

Um, could you please fish without flirting?



With the net now teeming with fish, we set off for the Ancient Capital, Lolia.

Since it was relatively far away, we had to hurry if we wanted the fish to

arrive fresh. So, as a matter of course, we were flying on our brooms.

Atolie was flying the net with magic, while I was giving Viola a ride behind me. Our two brooms were hovering above the forest. The leaves of the trees below us billowed in waves, as if we were still floating on the water.

“Oh...I wish I was with sweet Atolie...” Behind me, sitting sideways on the broom, Viola sounded despondent.

When I looked far off into the distance, I could see the figure of Atolie with the net floating in the air beside her. She was in the middle of throwing some kind of hand sign in our direction, as usual.

“...What is she saying?” I asked.

“She’s saying,” Viola answered, ““Should we have bought souvenirs for everyone? This is my first time visiting a new city!””

“.....”

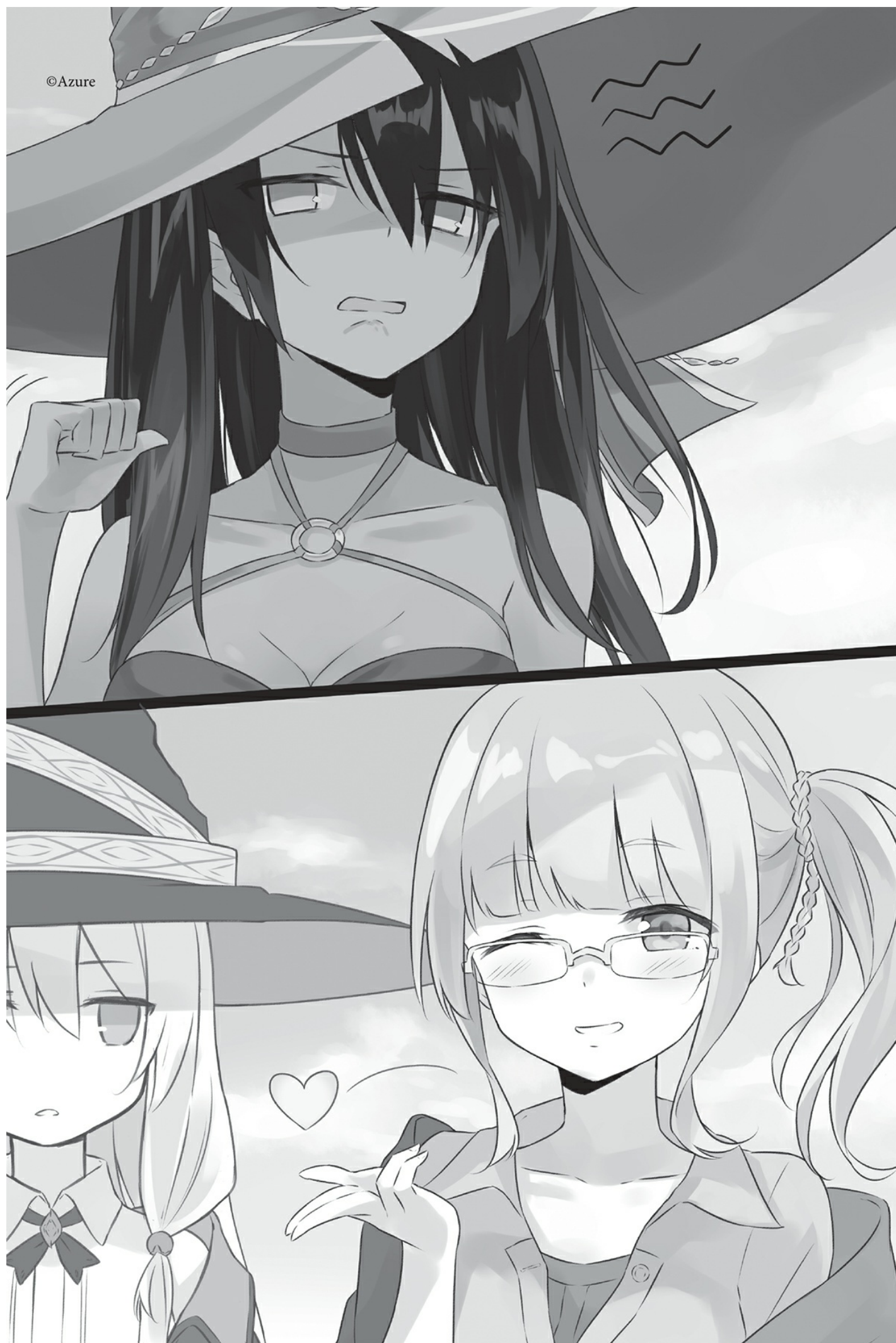
Originally Viola and I were planning to go alone, but right before we left, Atolie had started grumbling, “Wait. You can’t go without me holding the net. It’s dangerous with just the two of you.”

Even when I chided her, saying we would be just fine because I would hold the net, she went on and on. “It’ll be too heavy for you.”

We had accepted her help since there was no reason to refuse. Apparently, the girl had a great interest in what lay outside her city.

“.....”

Viola sent some kind of sign to Atolie without a word.



“What did you say?”

“I told her I love her.”

“.....”

When I looked at Atolie flying behind us, she was hocking a loogie into the forest below.

When we arrived at the Ancient Capital and told the gate guard of the circumstances, he hurriedly saluted us, saying, “Understood! In that case, please come this way.” He escorted us to the palace.

Atolie must have recalled the one time she had encountered the soldiers of this country, because she was growling to herself until Viola put her hands on her cheeks in a huff and molded her lips into a smile. She looked just like the owner of an untrained pet.

We arrived at the palace, where the soldiers let out hoots of exclamation.

“Wow, a mage!”

“Two of them!”

“How scary!”

They saluted us one after another. We imitated them and gestured back.

One of the mages on our side was openly hostile. She even had a certain energy about her, as if she might jump up and bite the hands of the saluting soldiers.

Viola seemed to fuss over her like always.

Do you think you could hold her leash a little tighter?

“I am the king of this country.”

At the far end of the room we were shown to, on the other end of a red carpet, was an old man seated on an extravagant throne. As he said in his self-introduction, he was the king. Atop his graying head sat a hefty crown.

“Heya.”

“Good day.”

“Die.”

We each lined up and gave our respective greetings. There was one questionable response in the mix.

“I could have sworn I just heard that mage over there tell me to die, but... anyway, what’s in that net?” The king’s gaze was concentrated on Atolie.

“I hate you. Die.” Even in a place like this, Atolie displayed her totally rude, completely asinine sense of honesty.

Viola rushed to clarify things with the scowling king. “Your Highness, the language is different in her home. What she said just now did not mean what it sounded like.”

“Hmm, is that so?”

“Yes. Here’s what she was saying: ‘Sunken City is the love nest of me and Viola, so we’d like you to stay out of the way of our peaceful life and child-rearing plans.’”

“I did not say that.” Atolie jabbed Viola in the side menacingly.

“She said she didn’t say that.”

“Here is what she meant by that: ‘What? Your Highness, are you jealous that I get to spend every day with such a beautiful—’”

“I did not say that.”

“What do you people want?” Sighing, the king glanced over at me for the first time.

.....

It was like he was pleading with me to help him.

“Um...” I was at a bit of a loss, but I decided to abandon the two girls who were flirting next to me and continue the conversation on my own.

I told him that Sunken City was a town where people lived. That the residents didn’t want any conflict and wanted to proceed with peaceful negotiations if possible. That it had been a mistake the other day when they had driven away the soldiers of this country using magic. That we had brought fish with us this

time as an apology for that incident.

Okay, so I didn't get everything exactly right, but oh well, I guess that's fine.

"...Mm-hmm."

After he finished listening to what I had to say, the king sighed solemnly. "In other words, you'd like to apologize for your rudeness before. Well, that's just fine. So, moving forward—what are you intending to do?"

He seemed to be unbothered by what had happened before.

Viola was the one who immediately replied. "I think it would be all right for you to do as you please. If you want to go fishing, do it to your heart's content. We won't mind, even if you continue to catch fish until Sunken City withers and dies, if you are so inclined." She said this carelessly with an indifferent attitude.

"Wha...?! What are you saying?!" Atolie demanded, shocked by Viola's inappropriate words, which ran totally counter to the intent of the reconciliation negotiations. "You! You're going to stab us in the back?!"

Viola's collar bunched as Atolie yanked her back forcefully and fixed her with a sharp glare.

Viola continued looking at the king, as if she didn't care about Atolie's behavior in the least. "Your Highness. I would like you to make us a promise, though. If you will accept our conditions, then distribute the fish that we have brought today among all your citizens and eat it, please. And then swear to never raise a hand against the people of Sunken City again."

"...Hmm."

The king looked troubled. In the midst of this exchange, Atolie was shaking Viola around violently by the collar. "Why...I...oughtta...!"

A few moments passed.

"Very well."

As if it was a matter of course, the king accepted the conditions.

There was no argument whatsoever. We had just given the people new fishing grounds. There was no reason for him to reject the proposal.

I pinned Atolie's arms behind her back as she tried indignantly to attack Viola and watched with my own eyes as Viola and the king exchanged written pledges.

"Why are you getting in my way?! Are you two planning to sell my home?!"

"That's not it. That's not what we're doing," I whispered close to her ear so that the king couldn't hear.

To begin with, that was never the plan.

Viola's actions were all part of our excellent scheme. The scheme that included just one aspect we had yet to tell either the king or Atolie about.

"—But is that fish really all right? It doesn't have any poison or anything in it, does it?" The king's concern was only natural, since smooth talk often had ulterior reasons.

"Please set your mind at ease. We haven't dosed it with poison. As proof, how about we have the native girl eat some?"

"Huh? Well then, I'll have the castle staff prepare it."

The king gave a signal, and soldiers collected the net full of fish and left the room.

"You've got to be kidding!" Atolie lamented. "You are all devils!" She went on and on, shouting mournful things until she tired herself out. "I can't...! I'm going home...!" She cried peevishly until a soldier came back holding a plate.

A good portion of the large plate was filled with sauce or something, making poor use of the space. It was a simple meunière dressed up like a fancy dish.

Viola dug into the fish with a fork, stabbed a bite-sized piece, and moved it toward Atolie's mouth. "Okay, open wide!"

"No way! It's probably poisoned!"

"It is not!"

"No! Way!"

"You're stubborn!"

I sighed, and Atolie looked at me, silently asking for help.

There was no avoiding it.

I let go of Atolie's wrists and slipped my hands around to her sides. Her shoulders hitched in surprise, and the moment that she got an inkling of what I was about to do, I squeezed.

"Gah!" Atolie's mouth opened in surprise.

"Gotcha." Viola shoved the fish into her mouth.

At first, Atolie frowned, and big tears formed in the corners of her eyes, but gradually her expression slackened, and she chewed her food and obediently swallowed.

After eating the meunière, she was simply silent.

Head hanging, whole body slack, she stood stock-still in a daze.

And then, as everyone in the palace was intently watching, Atolie reluctantly let just a single sentence slip out.

".....I'm going to bed."

"Wonderful." Viola chuckled and put her hands on Atolie's cheeks.

The fish were not, in fact, poisoned.

It was much less complicated than that.

To put it simply, *only Atolie and her people* could eat those fish.



I had heard the truth while we were in the boat.

While she was in the middle of flirting with Atolie via hand signal, Viola suddenly told me something as if she had just remembered it. "Those fish are inedible, you know."

"Huh?"

"Those fish have a natural poison to protect them from predators, you see? Whether you stew them, grill them, dry them, or eat them raw, when you eat them, your stomach will immediately begin to hurt."

"...Now, hold on just a minute. Everyone here is eating them. You said they

line the dinner tables of the city, right?”

“Yes. They do, here in Sunken City.”

“.....”

She was grinning, but right after she said that, the look in her eyes hardened.

“My guess is this country used to be weak. They were likely unable to do anything when they were conquered by the Ancient Capital, Lolita. Probably when Lolita began facing famine, they closed the forest so they could develop the land, but—even when this city was flooded with water, it didn’t put an end to the lives of the residents. Forgotten by the ages, they never left this place and lived in harmony with the water.”

They had gone from being a city with a canal to one under the water. However, the people had done their best to adapt to the changes in their environment. The forest became a forbidden zone, and with no outsiders stepping foot into their territory, the people had undergone their own unique evolution.

“Those fish were not originally edible. They’re quite poisonous. However, as the ages passed, the people’s bodies must have adapted to the poison. That’s how they’ve survived until now.”

“...Is that possibly why you’ve not been eating the fish this whole time?”

Those who committed careless mistakes were only allowed to eat salad, as were those who were thrown in jail. Apparently, she had been doing just that, living her life without eating the fish up until now.

“That’s right. Because if I ate it, it would destroy my stomach.”

“.....”

“Well, there’s also the reason that sexually harassing sweet Atolie turned out to be more fun than I expected.”

“Are you actually just a lecherous old man in disguise?”

What’s with that way of thinking?

“Well, anyway.” She looked at me, even as she was sending off harassing

hand signals. “That’s why I’m taking this fish to the Ancient Capital, Lolia. If I do that, they should realize it, too. They should realize they can’t meddle with Sunken City. They can’t eat the fish even if they get their hands on them.”

“...Is that what’s going on?”

“That’s what’s going on!”

“*Oh-ho-ho!*” She let out a laugh as she told me conspiratorially, “With the passage of many long years, the people of Sunken City have developed a poison to protect them from their enemies.”



“*Why are you only telling me about this now?*”

Still looking indignant, Atolie nimbly made hand signs at us after we told her the situation on the way back. Viola explained the meaning for me.

“*That was... Er... The thing is...I wanted to see your surprised face.*” Viola sent off a flurry of hand signs.

“*Don’t mess with me. I don’t care. I’m telling Pops about you.*”

What was with that?

“Well, well, it’s all right. Now Sunken City will have peace.”

As they had been exchanging written pledges, Viola had secretly handed the king a letter and sweetly whispered, “Please open this after you have eaten all the fish, okay?”

Inside was the truth about Sunken City.

She was probably trying to prevent Lolia from using this incident as an excuse for further hostilities. Because even if there were fish to be caught in Sunken City, they weren’t edible.

“...But there’s one thing that doesn’t make any sense,” I said, as if talking to myself. “After all, why did Atolie and the soldier have a confrontation in the first place? If that hadn’t happened, you would never have gotten into such a complicated situation, right?”

After all, the people of Sunken City understood common speech. If they had gone through the trouble to talk to each other the first time, there would have

been no need for us to go out of our way to bring fish.

“Atolie is so cute! I want to hug her!”

Ignoring my question, Viola was bouncing around on the broom, while Atolie looked truly fed up with her, sending another signal.

It was an awfully strange hand sign.

She stuck her fingers straight out and brought the palm of her extended hand right up to her forehead.

It looked like some kind of salute.

“...Sorry, what’s the meaning of that?” I yanked at Viola’s stole.

“Ah, that one is—” She hesitated. “It means ‘I’m going to smash your head in.’”

“Oh, of course.” *That’s it, huh.*

“Basically, it means she wants to kill me.”

“.....”

“I think that was probably the source of all this, when she had her exchange with the soldier.”

“.....”

Is that the punch line?

“Well anyway, that’s all over now. Let’s forget the past. They accepted our apology and everything.”

Sunken City would continue to follow its own unique path and live in quiet isolation. The Ancient Capital would also probably persist, despite its food shortages.

Like a poisonous fish swimming quietly through the ocean, and like a larger fish that takes no notice, each would continue to live on without looking at the other.

Their histories would wash away, and they would adapt in no time.



CHAPTER 7

Amnesia's Forgotten Travelogue

In a certain place, there was a mysterious girl who one day lost her memory.

Her name was Amnesia. She was seventeen years old. She wore a thick black headband in her sleek, white, shoulder-length hair, and her jade-green eyes were as beautiful as the flowers of summer.

She wore a white robe, a black skirt, and tall boots. She seemed to have retained some memory of handling a sword, because she also wore a saber at her hip. It was the outfit of someone who was not exactly sure whether she was a mage or a swordsman.

She could not remember anything. All she had left from her previous life were a few habits, deeply ingrained, like caring for her weapon before bed or reviewing her diary after waking in the morning.

The girl had come from an isolated city a short distance away. It was called the Holy City, Esto, and she was traveling toward it, apparently. She learned as much from her diary.

There must have been something for her there, in Esto.

There was always the chance that reaching Esto would not jog her memory. That fear crashed over her like a wave several times a day, but even so, she could do nothing other than move ahead.

She was continuing her journey on this day, carefully writing in her diary, which had *Read this when you wake up in the morning* inscribed onto the cover. She recorded the events of every day of her sojourn.

"Welcome! This is the Frontier Town, Albed! Are you a traveler?"

"Mm. Well, I suppose so."

After nodding to the sentry at the gate, she curtly answered his two or three questions and proceeded without incident through immigration inspection. For his last question, the guard turned a suspicious eye on her and asked, "...You

seem to be wearing a robe, but you're not a mage, are you?"

"I can't use magic or anything...so no?" she answered, tilting her head in confusion. That was the truth—and even if she had once been able to use magic, she certainly could not remember any now. It seemed acceptable to say she was not a mage.

In the end, the guard looked at the saber hanging from her hip and decided that she wasn't. Then he opened the gate, and she passed through it.

Before her stretched a rather common townscape. There were lanes lined with brick buildings, and the streets were paved with the same brickwork. Moss burst from the gaps between the bricks in patches. The scenery gave one the vague sense that the town harbored some deep history, standing there unchanged since time immemorial.

On the other hand, towns like this were not hard to come by, and this one did not have any particular charm or anything to set it apart.

But that wasn't the case to this girl.

"...Beautiful!"

Everything that caught her eye, everything about the places she visited, was novel to her. The scene before her eyes was fresh and new. It all glittered like gold. She was captivated.

To not forget that scenery, she took out her diary and began to write of the beauty of the town, for the benefit of her tomorrow self, as she walked. Even if she had no memory, she could capture the loveliness in prose. That's what she decided.

And this was probably not the first time. When she read back over the diary, she had found she often went on at length about the beauty of other towns just like this one.

And so the girl lost herself in the movement of her pen over the page and entirely failed to notice the other person headed directly toward her.

"—Ack!" The new person fell on their butt.

"—Ah!" Amnesia skidded on her backside.

She had collided with a girl of a similar age. Her ash-colored hair was long and sleek, and she had lapis-colored eyes.

She must have been a local. She was dressed in extremely ordinary clothing, a simple cardigan and dress, accessorized with only a single expensive-looking necklace. She had a bag on her shoulder, but it was hanging open. She looked like she might have been in the middle of shopping, as between them was scattered a half-eaten apple and several magazines, as well as a diary and other items.

“Ah, s-sorry! I was caught up in my writing...” In a fluster, Amnesia scrambled to gather up the other girl’s belongings.

The girl with ash-colored hair stood up and calmly brushed the dirt from her backside. “...No, I’m the one who wasn’t looking where I was going.” Her words turned sour as she continued without pause. “But I can’t say I commend you for writing while walking. Nothing can be said for that except you limit your own field of vision,” she snapped.

Perhaps the half-eaten apple had been a poisoned one.

“Uh... Sorry...” Amnesia hung her head meekly and apologized.

By the way, the girl with the ashen hair who had run into her from the opposite direction had been using poor manners, eating an apple while walking. Of course, she hadn’t been looking at her surroundings. She had been deeply absorbed in eating her apple. Despite that, she’d had a bone to pick with Amnesia, blinded to her own role in the incident, possibly because she was a bit angry that her apple had gotten dirty when they ran into each other. She’d shown her own character to be rather rotten. Perhaps the half-eaten apple had been a rotten one.

“...Well, let’s both be more careful from now on, shall we?”

The two of them picked up their belongings that had scattered and mixed together, then turned their backs on each other and walked away as if nothing had happened.

They took separate paths.

“...Maybe I shouldn’t write in my diary while I’m walking.”

Having returned the diary to her breast pocket, the girl started to talk to herself.

However, she didn't know she had always written in her diary as she walked. She also had no way of knowing that she had never taken the time to write in her diary before bed. And finally, she didn't realize the diary she had just tucked away had gotten mixed up with one belonging to a different person.

That evening, she booked a room at an inn and slept, falling into a deep slumber without recording the events of the day.

And then she forgot even that fact as soon as she slipped off to sleep.



"...The Holy City, Esto, huh?"

I had inquired with a local merchant as to whether there were any interesting places to visit nearby, and that is what he told me.

"Yes. That place is really incredible. And when I say incredible, I mean it's incredible because we don't know what's so incredible about it. It's so incredible that we don't know what's so incredible. I mean, it's really, really incredible."

"Sorry, but could you please explain it in a way I can understand?"

"Uh-oh, was that too difficult for you, princess?"

"I'm afraid I lack the royal upbringing needed to understand your nonsensical speech."

"....."

"So then what kind of country is it? Please tell me the specifics."

The merchant cleared his throat with a cough. "First of all, I should tell you I've never been there. Esto is largely closed to foreign trade. Outsiders are absolutely forbidden unless they are accompanied by a resident. I hear they're trying to keep powerful magical secrets from getting out to the rest of the world."

"Huh..."

"However, every now and again, somebody manages to prevail upon some

resident of Esto that they've met on the outside and infiltrate the city, but... most everybody, for whatever reason, comes back with absolutely no memories of the place. They forget everything that happens after they enter the city and can't remember a single thing about the days of their stay."

"....." There was one word I had gotten a little hung up on. "When you say, 'most everybody,' you mean that not everyone loses their memories, right?"

The merchant nodded. "There are some who remember. But..."

"But?"

"Anyone who doesn't lose their memory becomes a loyal citizen of Esto. And as loyal citizens, they're entirely dedicated to keeping the city's secrets."

"....."

In other words, you either lost your memory or became a citizen.

...What kind of city can this be? No one knows, and those who do know won't tell.

I'm intrigued...

This sounds like a place I should visit sometime soon. But I can't enter unless I'm accompanied by a local, so it'll be pretty difficult.

"Thank you very much. You've been very helpful. By the way, are there any interesting places around *besides* that one?"

"Let me see—oh, right, right. There is one more interesting place to visit. And it's straight down the road from here."

"Oh-hoh. What kind of place?"

I tilted my head, and the merchant said, "It's called the Frontier Town, Albed, and, well, it is an interesting place, but—ah, that's no good. It's difficult for witches to get into."

"....."

Again? Whether it's Esto or Albed, why does this region have so many restrictions?

I had my cheeks puffed out in frustration, and the merchant said, "Albed bans

entry to mages.”

Entry prohibited to mages.

I see. So there is no limit to the difficulties of immigration.

...But I guess you could say it's all right to enter if you're not a mage.

“I see. Please tell me all the details.”

“Huh? But witches can't—”

“Details, please.”

“.....”

And then I got the merchant to spit out all the information he knew.

The Frontier Town, Albed, had a long history, said to have been founded several hundred years ago. In times long past, in the surrounding countryside, magical supremacy was the order of the day, and anyone who was not a mage—well, the usual course was apparently that those people were mocked and treated as subhuman, and even faced banishment. That was just the way of things back then.

The banished searched around for a place to dwell and eventually arrived at the remains of a fortress that had previously been used in war. In the end, the people settled there. While they were settling, the population continued to increase, and before anyone knew it, the people were cultivating the land around the fortress, building houses out of bricks, and constructing walls.

A long time passed, and that place became known as the Frontier Town, Albed.

Because of what happened to them, the people who lived there resented all mages, and because no magic users were allowed into the country, their negative feelings only festered, generating a vicious cycle.

Well, that's the legend anyway.

“In other words, it's no problem as long as I'm not a mage, right?”

With that in mind, I quickly changed my clothes to an ordinary cardigan and dress. After donning this very plain outfit, I continued down the road toward

Albed.

It was not long before I arrived there.

“Welcome to the Frontier Town, Albed! Are you a traveler?”

The guard who came out to greet me with a smile fired off two or three questions. He finally cocked his head. “Well, I think you’re all right, but—you’re not a mage, are you?”

“I think you can tell by looking. No, I’m not,” I answered with a calm expression.

The guard nodded vigorously. “I thought so!”

And thus, I successfully infiltrated the Frontier Town.

“.....”

This was hearsay from the merchant, but apparently there were quite a few mages who had secretly crossed the border.

That’s why I wasn’t terribly worried as I stepped inside.

The first thing I did was take a walk around the town, filled with anticipation for what kind of country this place that forbade mages might be. To my surprise, any description of the country could be reduced to a single word—ordinary. It was done up in brick as far as the eye could see, but it was really nothing special.

The street stalls were plain. They had fruits lined up for sale.

The bookstore was ordinary. There was nothing in particular that could be called unique about this country.

Of course, the restaurants were also average. There was nothing that could be called a distinguishing characteristic.

I was nibbling on an apple as I went down the road, making my rounds and wondering if there wasn’t anything at all interesting here. I continued walking along the unremarkable road for several dozen minutes. Before I realized it, I discovered I had made my way back around to the gate where I had started.

“—Ack!”

“—Ah!”

And that’s exactly when I ran into a total stranger.



The following day. I opened my eyes in the room of an inn.

The light that leaked in from outside shimmered with the swaying curtains, telling me that morning had arrived with the warmth of early spring.

After yawning once, I changed my clothes, rushed out of the inn, and leaped out into the sunny street.

Stillness echoed through a town that had only just awakened.

“...Let’s see... How about I go around to all the spots I haven’t visited yet?”

I walked absentmindedly through the town.

As yesterday had been the first day of my stay, there was one place I had deliberately avoided.

The ruins of the fortress.

The place where the exiled people had founded their new homes. It was a place that could not be forgotten by the people here. If those people were still rejecting magic users, I was sure the fortress would have persisted. It wouldn’t have been demolished. One could imagine the fortress had a very high possibility of standing even now.

“.....”

I mean, I could see it there at the end of the road and everything.

MAGIC USER TEMPORARY INTERNMENT CENTER said the sign hanging from the building.

Ivy crept up the towering ramparts, and beyond the high walls, the rustic keep was dyed orange where it was hit by the light of the sun.

It looked like it had been here for a very long time. It showed signs of repairs from place to place. Even as the ages passed and the repairs mounted as it fell apart, it must have been standing on this spot the whole time.

Near the sign, there was a sentry standing stock-still, serving as a gate guard. He had a rifle on his shoulder, not moving even the slightest bit, like a

mannequin.

Why on earth had this place become a prison for mages? And just what did it mean by “temporary” ...?

“Aheh-heh-heh. This place, well...this is the place where we arrest mages who sneak into Albed and hold them until we toss them back outside.”

“Ah. Uh, okay.”

The suspicious old woman who had suddenly appeared on the scene explained it all to me. *Thanks, but who are you?*

“We were expelled by the mages, and this building has been right here ever since the first day we arrived. Historically, this building has been emblematic of our hatred toward mages. That’s why in the old days, our ancestors used it as a place to imprison mages who snuck into the country. Heh-heh...”

The old woman had a rather carefree demeanor for someone who was telling me about her country’s dark past.

By the way, who are you?

“.....” I replied with silence, and the old woman kept talking.

“Mages are locked up in here without exception and held until arrangements can be made for their expulsion. Then they are ransomed back to their friends and families on the outside for an exorbitant fee. This building is the biggest cash cow in all of Albed.”

“...I see.”

Smart business. I’m impressed.

The old woman continued. “Right, look here. See that carriage over there?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” I looked at the carriage heading down the road, straight for the Magic User Temporary Internment Center.

It was no ordinary carriage. The back was a large metal cage.

“That is a carriage for hauling any mages they catch. Look, there’s one in there now, isn’t there?”

“.....”

I was quite taken aback.

In the cargo hold of that carriage was a girl I remembered, staring blankly at the fortress with her jaw slack open.

.....

It was the white-haired girl I had collided with the day before.

What's this? Is she a mage? Did she infiltrate this country just like I did? I guess if you look closely, she has a vaguely magical look about her.

The carriage stopped in front of the gate.

Since I came all the way out here, I might as well see how they treat the mages once they apprehend them.

"We're here. This is the internment center." The driver of the carriage turned around and gave the girl a hard stare.

"Amazing...! You're saying I can stay in a huge castle like this? Nice!"

The way the girl was acting—her eyes sparkling earnestly from where she sat atop the carriage—did not seem to match the vibe of the place at all. Naturally, the driver got angry.

"Why, you! Do you understand what you've done? You entered our country without permission! How about feeling a little more remorseful of your crime?"

"Oh...but don't you think it's strange to tell me to repent when I'm being sent to such a luxurious facility?"

"...That's enough! Get out of the carriage! We're throwing you in jail!"

The irritated driver opened the cage around the cargo hold and dragged the girl out. The handcuffs jangling around both of her hands were the type that held each finger in place so that she couldn't close her fists. One chain stretched out from the handcuffs like a leash, and the driver yanked on it as he handed several pieces of paper over to the gate guard.

The guard flipped through the papers silently.

"Because you've been going around spreading rumors to the citizens of the town and to the owners of shops that you are a mage, from this point, you shall

be confined in the Magic User Temporary Internment Center. If you wish to go free, you must contact your friends, acquaintances, or family outside the city. Do you understand, Ashen Witch, Elaina?”

.....

Huh?

I blinked in surprise, but the guard was still staring at the white-haired girl without so much as glancing in my direction.

“...No, um, I lost my memory, and I don’t know whether I have any friends or family outside—”

“Take her away,” the guard ordered the driver sharply.

“C’mon!” the driver barked and yanked on the chain attached to the handcuffs.

“Um, hang on! Hey, listen to what I’m saying—”

Her voice faded out on the way to the dilapidated fortress.

.....

Huh? What’s going on?

Even though the exact particulars of a rather clever business strategy had just unfolded before my very eyes, I was preoccupied by something else. Exactly what had happened, and why had it ended with that girl getting called by my name?

And did she say she lost her memory...?

“Say, by the way, missy, won’t you give me some money?”

“Huh?”

The overly familiar old woman was still by my side. To make matters worse, she had her hand extended, pressing me for money. *I’m sorry, who are you?*

“What? You’re a sightseer, and I told you about the sights. Come on, fork over some cash... Think of it as an information fee.”

“.....”

I had been wondering what her deal was, and I guess it was a high-pressure sales tactic for sightseers.

Yet another clever business strategy. I let out a sigh.

By the way, she demanded one gold piece for her information fee. I was angry, so I used magic to enchant a copper piece to look like gold and handed it over.

Why on earth was a girl going around using my name when we've only run into each other once?

This was really bothering me. To begin, it was an extreme disgrace to have someone going by my name who had foolishly gotten herself arrested infiltrating this town.

I was annoyed—fuming!

"Um, excuse me. Could I ask you something?" I spoke to the gate guard. "Why on earth was she arrested?"

He turned his head toward me quickly and mechanically. "The Ashen Witch, Elaina? She's a fairly stupid witch."

Are you trying to pick a fight?

"...What do you mean?" I quietly swallowed my anger.

"According to the documents, she was going around in the morning asking ordinary citizens to teach her how to use magic. Apparently, she has completely lost her memories of anything before yesterday, and with them, her ability to do magic."

"Huh...is it amnesia?"

"Mm. But this country, as you know, forbids entry to mages. So even though we don't know what happened to her yesterday, once she revealed herself to be a mage, we arrested her."

"....." I suddenly had a thought. "But that witch didn't actually use any magic, right? Isn't it unfair to arrest her?"

Well, this girl wasn't me, but somehow it was hard to tolerate the idea of

someone using my name getting arrested, so I made an excuse for her.

However, the gate guard shook his head firmly. “She doesn’t appear to recall how to use magic, but unfortunately for her, we have a diary that confirms she’s a mage. She may have lost her memory, but her notes prove her guilt.”

“...A diary?”

Huh? This is getting more and more confusing.

I opened up my bag and pulled out my diary in a panic.

“Hmm...?”

It was a small book with a very similar design, but clearly different to my own.

On the cover, in neat calligraphy, was written *Read this when you wake up.*

The moment I looked at the cover, I knew it wasn’t mine.

“.....”

Wait...

...What?

What in the world is this?



I returned to my room at the inn for the moment, where I cracked open the diary.

Read this when you wake up.

When I turned the cover with those instructions, I found recorded there the journey of a girl named Amnesia.

It seemed she had begun her journey roughly one year earlier. It felt wrong to read too much of it, so I flipped through the pages, looking at the dates, and found that this girl Amnesia had a fairly consistent nature. Every day without fail, she recorded the events that had occurred. Personally, I would rather not write about a day unless something interesting happened, so you could say we had practically opposite personalities.

In the diary entry for the previous day, Amnesia was going on endlessly in a

long passage about the beauty of the Frontier Town. Halfway down, a strange line slithered across the page, and the entry abruptly ended.

“.....”

The girl with white hair and a headband must have been named Amnesia. That would explain things.

I imagined we accidentally swapped diaries when we bumped into each other, and we had ended up leaving the scene with the wrong one in hand.

“.....”

...What a mess.

But why on earth was she going by my name?

I discovered a clue that might explain it written at length on the page behind the front cover. It said:

This is your diary. Read it when you wake up in the morning.

Your name is Amnesia. You are seventeen years old. Since you just woke up, you probably can't even remember your own name. But take a look at the necklace hanging from your neck—I believe it bears the words “To our beloved Amnesia.” I don't know who you got it from, but there can be no doubt about the fact that your name is Amnesia.

In this diary, you record everything you have done and everything you have yet to do.

You are currently beset by an illness that erases your memory when you sleep at night.

I do not know the cause of your illness. However, your fine clothing and the saber at your hip were clearly crafted in a particular city. That place may be your home, so that is where you should head. Please continue onward to your native land.

I'm praying for your safe return.

Then the page behind the cover was brought to a finish with a single sentence.

The name of your home is the Holy City, Esto.

That's what it said.

"....."

I found it hard to believe.

However, if I thought backward from the present situation, this new development was consistent with what I had seen so far.

For example, let's assume she really did lose her memory every day.

She collided with me, swapped diaries with mine, then for some reason, she went to sleep without recording the events of the day.

Then she would wake up in the morning, missing all her memories. Since she wouldn't even know her own name, she must have found my diary by her side and mistakenly thought that she was Elaina.

Without knowing anything about this country, she then must have been under the impression that she had lost the ability to use magic, despite being a witch.

Of course, she had never been able to use magic at all.

To make matters worse, I hadn't written in my diary for several days, so the last page that she read would have been dated several days ago.

It wouldn't have been a stretch for her to assume she had lost her memories of the past few days.

"....."

Unfortunately for her, that all seemed to fit.

"...The Holy City, huh?"

I thought about Amnesia, who had lost her memory. About my diary. About the Holy City, Esto, where she should be headed.

What should I do?

Assuming she is a citizen of Esto, they ought to allow me to enter the country as her fellow traveler. And if she isn't a citizen of Esto, I'm sure the city has

something to do with her memory loss. If we make enough noise about it, they should let us at least enter the country.

I wonder if I have a duty to help the girl who has mistaken herself for being Elaina? Is it necessary?

“...Suppose it is.”

Or rather, I have no reason not to help her. Not to mention it's no reach to say I'm part of the reason why she's in jail right now.

It seemed like helping the girl made too much sense.

And so I stood up and proceeded toward the fortress once again.



“Yeah, so like, when I really thought about it, I realized that witch from earlier, Elaina, is like, my friend!” claimed a lone girl in a very stupid way, scratching her cheek. “Tee-hee!”

She was at the ruins, giving this line as an excuse to the guard.

Who was she?

That's right. She's me.

“For some reason, she's had this illness where she periodically loses her memory and then gets it back, and so, like, she's been traveling with me. Apparently, she doesn't even know who she is, and somehow wandered over here, you know?”

The guard nodded at me while I was making my excuses. “...Huh. So you're saying the witch only just remembered this morning that she is the Ashen Witch?”

“Bingo.”

The basic plot was that I was trying to sell him on the idea that she had only carelessly entered Frontier Town because of her unfortunate condition.

I would have been grateful if things went well and the guard simply released her, saying something like, *“If she had no memory, then I guess it's an honest mistake. I'll let her go.”*

“Even so, that doesn’t shake the fact that she’s a witch, and she came here. Before I can release that woman, you’ll have to pay her fine.”

“Tch.”

“Hey, did you just click your tongue at me?”

“No! I would never do something like that!” *I did. Whatcha gonna do about it?* “So about that fine. How much is it?”

“Roughly twenty gold pieces.”

“Oh no. You’re trying to swindle me...”

It’s too much... I mean, I have enough on me...but I don’t want to pay up...

“If you want me to set the witch free, you need to pay that amount. Up front. In cold, hard coin. It’s no problem if you can’t! Your friend will just spend the rest of her life in jail.”

“.....”

From his firm stance, it was more than apparent the guard had not even the slightest inclination to back down.

I resigned myself and let out a big sigh. “...Fine. I’ll pay.”

Because it seemed like there would be no moving forward if I didn’t.

“Well then, before we hand the Ashen Witch over to you, we’ll have you confirm it’s her. You said you’re her traveling companion, right? In that case, you ought to know all the places she’s visited up until now.”

“.....”

I had expected them to obediently hand the girl over, but they hit me with an even more bothersome plot twist.

I was already feeling resentful. I did not much care for being strung along.

With an indifferent look, the gate guard cracked open the diary of the Ashen Witch—well, it was my own diary, though.

“First, which country did the Ashen Witch visit most recently?”

“.....”

Of course, he was talking about me.

“Sunken City.”

“Correct. And her least favorite food?”

“All varieties of mushrooms.”

“Mm-hmm. And the person she secretly idolizes?”

“...Her teacher.”

...What's with this Q&A session? And just how much of my diary did he read?

“All right then, what's the title of this diary?”

“.....Wandering Witch.”

“Very well.” After that, the guard paused for a moment, then tilted his head.

“I have one last question... Why on earth does the Ashen Witch repeat ‘That’s right. She’s me’ so often? Is it a catchphrase or something?”

“.....Um, I think so, yes.”

“And she seems to be really obsessed with money. What’s the deal with that? Does it mean witches don’t take any issue with committing dirty deeds?”

“.....I’m sure she considers those occasions to be exceptions, like when she’s stolen from someone so nasty that she’d like to forget their existence immediately.”

“Plus, she spends a lot of words waxing poetic about her beauty. What’s with that? Is the Ashen Witch in love with herself?”

“.....I suppose she is, yes.”

“And isn’t she too sweet toward other women? Sounds to me like she’s biased against men.”

“.....I think she’s just not accustomed to dealing with men.”

“On top of that—”

I don’t particularly want to recount the entire rest of the exchange, so allow me to omit it.

“.....Please stop...I’m begging you...”

After every aspect of my diary was thoroughly skewered, I could feel my face burning red.

The gate guard finally seemed satisfied and closed the diary. "Mm, very well. Hey, bring the woman here!" he shouted behind him.

"....."

We waited a moment. From the building on the other side of the gate, a woman appeared, pulled along by a man. She had a thick black headband in her white hair, and her eyes were wide with surprise. "Huh? Am I being released?"

She met eyes with me. She must not have recalled colliding with me the previous day, because she cocked her head. "...Who are you?"

"I'm your friend. I don't suppose you remember me," I answered.

"Why is your face red? Do you have a fever?"

"Please leave me alone." I turned my face aside. I wanted to escape the fact that my own diary had been read aloud.

The guard looked at each of us in turn. "Ashen Witch," he said to her. "Your friend has come to collect you. Once you are released, you are to leave straightaway and never come back here again!"

To me, he said, "That'll be twenty gold pieces. Hand it over now." He stuck out his hand.

"....." After letting out a big sigh, I paid him the amount from my purse. "...Here you go."

"Very good."

The guard simply confirmed the amount of gold, put it away, and took the handcuffs off the girl. While he was at it, he handed over her personal effects, like the diary and saber. Well, the diary was mine.

The girl had gotten back her hands and her freedom with a *clink*. "...Thank you?" she said with a tilt of her head, perhaps not yet able to comprehend the situation.

"Don't mention it," I replied, then took her hand and started to walk off.

“Could you come with me for a second?”

And this is how I left Albed at a brisk pace—taking with me the amnesiac who had assumed my name.



We had left the Frontier Town and were walking through a prairie.

After changing back into my usual robes, I explained everything.

I explained that I was not really her friend. That I was the true Ashen Witch, Elaina. And the reason why she had been arrested.

“...Hmm? Wait a minute. What on earth do you mean?”

In response to me yammering on and explaining everything, Amnesia seemed to have difficulty processing the situation, as I had expected.

“Like I said, you’re not the Ashen Witch. The reason why you think you’re Elaina is because you picked up my diary by mistake.”

“...But I don’t remember that happening...”

“Read this.”

It would probably be faster to have her read it than for me to explain further.

I handed her the diary.

“.....”

After she had turned a few pages as we walked, she whispered, “My name is... Amnesia... Huh. That seems to fit me better than Elaina...” She took out a pen.

With incredibly natural movements, she started writing while walking.

Her lovely penmanship looked like it was written by the exact same person who had penned the words in all the other entries.

At this point, she seemed to have finally realized she was Amnesia.

“But...I certainly did think it was awfully strange... It was written right there in the diary that I was a witch, even though I didn’t feel like I could use magic at all...”

“I’m sure.”

“And even though I didn’t think I was all that cute when I looked in a mirror, I spent an awful lot of time praising my own appearance...”

“Do you want to get knocked over the head?”

Are you looking for a fight? Is that what you’re doing?

“But why did you—umm, Ashen Witch, Elaina? Why did you help me? I’m grateful, but I’m afraid I don’t understand your motivations.”

“It’s written in your diary that your hometown is the Holy City, Esto, right?”

“Huh? Mm. Seems that way.”

“Well, I have an interest in that place. But since I can’t get in unless I’m with you—”

Amnesia clapped her hands sharply and nodded vigorously. “I see! So it was a scheme to use me to get into Esto, right?”

Yes, but wasn’t there another way to say that? It makes me seem like the bad guy.

“Is it all right if I accompany you on your journey?”

“Of course!” She broke into a smile. I had more or less realized it already, but she didn’t seem to be a bad person. “I was planning to ask you the same thing. Since it seems like I can’t get by without my diary—I was just thinking I’d like to have someone like you with me. That’s why when you told me you were my friend, I was glad. *Oh, so this kind of person was my friend*, I thought...though I guess that wasn’t really true.....” She seemed just a bit sad.

“..... So what should I call you from now on?”

“Amnesia! And you?”

“Elaina.”

“Nice to meet you, Elaina.”

“Same to you, Amnesia.”

Our exchange was a little strange, and she and I laughed in mutual embarrassment. After that, as if nothing had happened, we lined up shoulder to shoulder with each other and took off walking.

Down the same road this time.



After the Ashen Witch and the girl had left, the man guarding the gate stood at attention in front of the building that served as the Magic User Temporary Internment Center, as he always had.

“I’ve seen those clothes before,” he muttered to himself.

The soldier who had taken the Ashen Witch to the Internment Center earlier overheard him. “...Where did you see them?”

The gate guard looked up at the sky, as if to follow his own memory as it flowed along like the clouds.

“I’m starting to think she wasn’t the Ashen Witch after all.”

“...Well, from her easygoing attitude, I didn’t get much of a witchy impression, but...”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“...Meaning?”

“Those were the clothes of the Order of Holy Knights from the Holy City. I read about it a long time ago.”

“The Holy City, huh...?”

Those were words that neither the soldier nor the guard were particularly glad to hear.

The so-called Holy City was the very same one that had once driven the ancestors of the people of Frontier Town out of their original homes while preaching the supremacy of magic users.

The woman calling herself the Ashen Witch—the woman they had arrested—had been wearing the uniform of that very same order.

That fact was beyond incomprehensible.

It called into question whether that girl with the white hair and headband was the Ashen Witch after all.

The soldier suddenly tilted his head in puzzlement. “But the fact that a witch

had lost her memory was...strange, right? When you leave the city, only your memories of Esto are supposed to be erased. But...if she belonged to the Holy Knights, then she must be a citizen of Esto. And in that case, her memory shouldn't have been erased at all—huh?”

When the Frontier Town was founded, the Holy City had surrounded itself with a magical barrier that prevented knowledge of their magical skills from leaking into the outside world. This way, any outsiders who left the city would have all memories of their stay erased.

If you were a citizen, they let you keep your memories, trusting you to keep their secrets.

However, the girl who had been arrested as the Ashen Witch did not fall under either of those categories. Her situation was nothing short of peculiar.

“...So do you suppose she was really an actual witch?”

“I wonder—” The gate guard shrugged dramatically. “Though it doesn't really matter if she was a witch or not—I'm certain that woman was wrapped up in some kind of complicated situation.” He continued. “Oh, I've got the money we extorted from the other woman. Take it to the vault.”

He lazily tossed the bag containing the twenty gold pieces to the soldier.

The soldier quickly snatched the bag from the air, and in the same motion, opened it to inspect the contents—

“...Hmm?”

He discovered an even stranger situation.

The soldier seemed nervous. “...Um, all of these are copper pieces.”

“Come again?”

“...Why did you accept coppers?”

“No, I'm sure I checked them! Huh? They really are. What happened?!”

“Well, don't ask me...”

Somehow, the money he had taken from the woman was now a sack of copper.

It was almost like the copper coins had been enchanted to look like gold.



After that, Amnesia and I greeted the morning sun together many times.

The day after we met, I had learned that, unlikely as it seemed, her diary contained the truth.

Although we walked the same roads, she never remembered a thing, and in the morning, the only words she would say to me were simply, “Who are you?”

No matter how friendly we became, no matter how much we talked, the words she spoke to me when we met every morning were always the same.

It was painful and sad. These feelings became stronger as time went on. However, the girl who I met every day, who knew nothing of the world, was always cheerful and asked me all sorts of things with a smile on her face like a flower in bloom.

And then one day—

“...Say, what kind of place was the country where we first met?”

Suddenly, she asked me such a thing as if it just crossed her mind.

“Let me see...”

After pretending to think on it for just a little while, I answered her with just two words, as jokingly as possible.

“I forget.”



CHAPTER 8

The Hero, the Dragon, and the Sacrifice

“...Nnh.”

It was morning, and I opened my eyes to the sunbeams streaming through the open window.

Trying to escape from the light that poured over me mercilessly as if to say “*wake up, lazy bones,*” I rolled over in my sleep and turned my face away.

Sleepiness still clung to my body, and I felt like I could fall once again into a pleasant slumber if I were to close my eyes for just a moment.

“.....Nnh?”

However, immediately after I rolled over on the bed, the drowsiness evaporated, and my eyes opened wide, blinking in surprise.

There, as if to spoil my peaceful morning, was a sight that I could not have predicted and did not understand.

“.....”

“.....”

In the corner of my single bed was a girl. Her short white hair was very beautiful; it looked like if I were to touch it, it would be very soft and smell very nice. She was breathing peacefully in her sleep, looking very tranquil, with the corners of her mouth curved up slightly as if she was having a happy dream.

To put it plainly, Amnesia was in my bed.

Why? Is she? Sleeping with me?

“...Um, what? What happened last night...?”

I sat up in bed, holding my head. I wondered if I had lost the ability to remember anything that happened the previous day, too.

I think that yesterday, after everything that happened, we fell asleep in this inn. How strange. I'm sure this was a two-person room and that there were two

beds. But the bed against the opposite wall is empty. The sheets are all messed up, but there's no one in it. I'm sure she fell asleep in the bed over there, but...

Why is she in my bed?

Well, I don't remember, and of course, Amnesia can't remember anything from before she fell asleep, so that means there's not a single person who can explain this current situation. It's an unsolvable mystery.

"Um, Amnesia?"

Even so, with a tiny spark of hope, I shook her body. Maybe it's possible we'll get lucky and she'll remember if something happened?

"Nnn." The unconscious girl punched me.

"....."

"Aan."

I was stunned, and this time, she launched a kick at me.

"....."

"Uun."

This time, she flew in with a headbutt. Rather than the nice fragrance of her hair, I tasted blood.

I wonder if there's something wrong with my nose.

.....

It seemed like she was just tossing and turning in her sleep. And that she had traveled from one bed to the other while sleeping.

I see, I see.

"....."

It was morning already.

I decided to wake her. Rather harshly.

"...Um, who am I? Who are you...? And why does my face hurt...?"

As I had done a few moments earlier, the girl who had just woken up squinted

in the sunlight and rubbed her cheeks.

Did someone slap you? Poor thing...

“Good morning. You are Amnesia. I am the Ashen Witch, Elaina. I’m your travel companion.”

“Amnesia...? Travel...? ...Sorry. I can’t remember anything, but...”

“.....” I nodded in understanding. “You suffer from an illness that causes you to lose your memory every day. We don’t really know why. You seem to have been in this condition for at least a year. Here, take a look at this.”

I tossed over her diary, which had been sitting on the desk.

It seemed like she didn’t understand what was happening, but even so, her body must have remembered, because her hands didn’t hesitate to open the diary.

...We’ve spent a week traveling together, but it seems like I’d better start thinking more strategically about the rooms I share with her. When I wake up in the mornings, I’ve seen her sleeping hidden underneath her bed, which makes me think she might have fallen on the floor or something.

That’s pretty intense for tossing and turning, huh?

It wasn’t doing any real damage, so I’ve just let it slide so far, but it’s kind of a problem if she’s sneaking into my bed. From now on, I wonder if I should put her to bed bound in ropes like string-tied ham or something.

“.....”

Amnesia flipped through the pages of the diary. “...I see. So we’re in the middle of a journey to the Holy City, Esto?”

“That we are.” I nodded.

It took her remarkably little time to get up to speed. She was probably growing accustomed to waking up without her memory.

“.....” She turned the pages, and after a short while, her face began to change colors. “...Wait. Seriously?”

I wonder what’s written in there. She didn’t act like that yesterday morning, so

I suppose she's probably reading her entry from last night.

...I guess there were a lot of things that happened last night...so it's not impossible that she would have such a reaction.

"As you'll understand by reading about it, we dealt with a lot yesterday," I said.

It was so taxing. After all, we did everything and then some.

"....." She closed the diary and stared at me. "...Elaina, um...how was I?" Amnesia asked with a very coquettish look in her eye.

"How were you...? Normal, I guess."

"N-normal...? Yeah...?"

Something about the way she was acting was strange.

"...?"

"Tell me, since when have we had that kind of relationship...?"

"Huh? Since the day we met, but..."

"Oh, since the day we met...? R-really...? You work quickly...Elaina..."

"What?"

I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about.

"...Elaina, are you accustomed to doing things like this?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, well...you know...between two girls..."

I guess she's talking about traveling together.

"It's my first time."

"How can you remain so composed if it's your first time...? Meanwhile, I was extremely surprised when I read my diary. I mean...my heart is pounding."

"....."

I'm certain she's never acted like this in the morning before.

What on earth was written in her diary entry? But, well, I'm sure the anxiety of

losing her memory must be driving her a little crazy.

I approached her. "...Come on. Calm down. I'm sure you're confused about a lot of things, but you'll definitely get your memory back before too long."

I planted my hand on her shoulder.

When I did, her shoulders hitched in surprise for a moment.

".....Mm."

As if she had come to some decision, Amnesia relaxed, slowly closed her eyes, and pursed her lips ever so slightly. For some reason, her face flushed red, and her shoulders trembled a tiny bit, as if she was holding her breath.

"...What are you doing?"

Frankly speaking, I didn't understand her behavior.

".....You're not going to kiss me?"

"????????"

Frankly speaking, I didn't understand the meaning behind her words.

Why would I do that? Is she stupid? Is she an idiot? What's going on? The two of us don't even have that kind of relationship, right? How in the world would she come to that conclusion? I have so many questions. I think she might be stupid. What is she thinking? She needs to stop joking around.

"Um.....what was written in your diary entry from yesterday?"

"...You want to make me say it out loud? You're so mean."

"No, that's not what I meant."

"You're dirty."

"I said that wasn't what I meant. What are you talking about?"

"...Ah! Sorry. Maybe I'm the more dominant partner? That's right. You seem like you'd be the submissive one, if I had to guess. I didn't pick up on that. I'm sorry, okay?"

"Seriously. Stop it. I'm asking nicely. Hey, don't get so close. Back away. You don't want to see me angry."

“I don’t think I’m very used to this role, but I’ll do my best!”

“Don’t try *too* hard! Hey, I thought I told you to back away from me. Stop it, please!”

I could not have rejected her any harder.

After that, it took a little bit of time to correct her misunderstanding, but since it unfolded into an exchange that would be embarrassing to watch, I’ll spare you the details.



*

“...I see. That’s what’s going on.”

After changing from my pajamas into my usual robe, I got her to show me her diary. By the way, I had changed clothes simply because our time to check out of the inn was coming up shortly—not because something had happened in that blank space up there, or for any other reason. Don’t misunderstand.

I wasn’t particularly in the habit of peeking into other people’s diaries, especially since I expected it would contain entries that had to do with me, since we had been traveling together. I really didn’t want to look, but circumstances are circumstances, and I had no other options.

“.....”

I looked over yesterday’s diary entry again.

On the whole, it was embarrassing to look at, so I’ll spare you that, too.

That said, why on earth had something like this...?

“There we go.” I tore the page out.

“Aah!”

Ignoring Amnesia’s sorrowful cry, I balled up the paper and tossed it into the wastebasket.

“Amnesia, I’m going to tell you the truth about what happened yesterday, so please listen carefully, okay?” I stared at her. “First of all, as should be obvious, we do not have *that kind* of relationship.”

“Really?”

“Yes. So please don’t force yourself to do things like that, okay?”

“...’Kay.”

“.....”

Why does she look so disappointed...?

At any rate, in this way, following my own memory, I told her a story.

“By the way, would you untie me now?”

“No.”



We had arrived at this village at almost exactly this time yesterday.

Surrounded by vibrant grassland, the village existed quietly among the flowers swaying in the morning sun and the trees dotting the scene.

When we entered the village, the first thing to meet our eyes was a throng of people.

“...Could it be some kind of festival?” I tilted my head.

“Looks fun, huh? How nice!” Amnesia was strangely excited.

By the way, she was being her normal self that day.

Almost the entire population of the village had gathered into a crowd, so we couldn’t find anyone outside of it, and eventually, we slipped straight into the throng.

The villagers were gathered in a ring, shouting words of encouragement.

“Attaboy!”

“You can do it!”

Their gaze fixed on the center of the circle.

“Raaaaah! I’m gonna do it!”

There stood a single sword stuck fast in a pedestal. The remarkably slim doubled-edged blade didn’t move in the slightest, despite the man trying with all his might to pull it out, straining until his face turned bright red.

It was clear something ceremonial was going on.

“...It’s no good! Your time’s up. Step aside.”

Before long, an older man standing nearby pulled the man away from the sword. “Next! Is there no one who can draw this sword?!”

From within the circle, hands shot into the air, as each man thought he would be the one to do it.

“Hmm...every one of them unsatisfactory...” The older man looked over the

circle, assessing the candidates.

And then—

His eyes stopped exactly where Amnesia and I were standing.

“Hmm? Unfamiliar faces. Who could you be?” The man walked toward us.

“I am called the Ashen Witch, Elaina. I am a traveler.” I bowed.

“My name is Amnesia. I am also a traveler.” Amnesia bowed, too. “What kind of festival is this?”

“Oh...travelers, huh...” The old man nodded, deeply interested. “This is no festival, young ladies. This is a ceremony to save our village.”

“By doing what?” I tilted my head questioningly.

“Recently...a flying dragon has begun living near our village. And rather troublingly, it has started demanding we hand over the youngest, most beautiful girls as sacrifices.”

Wow, how cliché.

“But there’s no need to worry. Following the old legends, the villagers have gathered together to pray for the arrival of someone who will at last free the sword from its pedestal and use it to slay the dragon.”

Wow, how cliché.

It was almost as overused as a folk story or fairy tale.

“How about our two visitors? Won’t you give the sword a tug to commemorate your visit? Nothing will happen, of course, but it’ll make a good memory. *Oh-hoh-hoh.*”

The old man laughed lightheartedly and beckoned us over.

“Elaina, how about it?” Amnesia was pushing me by the elbow, wearing a joking smile.

...Well, I guess it’s fine.

I am a little bit curious anyway.

I quickly agreed and headed toward the pedestal and the sword. “I give this a

pull, right?”

I grasped the hilt gently.

Let me see. I wonder if I can get it out. Well, I suppose it's impossible...

“Okay, here I go!” I tightened my grip on the sword.

“.....Ah.”

But then I realized something.

Oh, this is bad.

It had become crystal clear that if I pulled on the sword as hard as I could, it would slide right out of the pedestal. That meant I would become the village hero and have to slay the dragon.

I glanced around briefly at my surroundings. The happy people didn't seem to have realized anything unusual about me yet. They were just shouting encouragement, like “You can do it!” and “You're the cutest girl in the world!”

You're fine. You haven't been found out.

“.....”

This was when a devil popped into my mind. “*Why don't you go ahead and pretend like you weren't able to pull it out? Wouldn't it be a bother to have to slay a dragon and everything?*”

I see, I see.

“No, wait,” an angel piped up. “*How about you pull out the sword, then pretend like you're heading off to slay the dragon, and then sell the blade to a pawnshop instead?*”

You're the angel...?

“.....”

In the end, I decided the devil's plan was best.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I wasn't able to pull it out, either.” I put on a foolish smile and returned to the circle, where the old man greeted me cheerfully.

“That's to be expected, you know. Because for generations, this sword has

been immovable by any but the most pure and tenderhearted. Someone so honest that they cannot tell a lie, who always prioritizes others over themselves, an incredible specimen of humanity who cannot even harm a fly.”

Hmm? Don't tell me you're picking a fight with me. If someone can't even kill a bug, how do you expect them to slay a dragon? What's that even supposed to mean?

“Well, that's the only person who could save our village from its terrible predicament. You can't expect travelers from other lands to—”

“Whoops. I pulled it out,” blurted Amnesia, cutting off the old man.

Shlep. The sword slid out pathetically.

Without anyone noticing, she had swapped places with me, and without anyone noticing, she had pulled the sword out of the pedestal.

“...Could this mean I'm a hero? Oh no, I'm blushing!” She was grinning with apparent embarrassment.

Around her, the villagers burst into an eager uproar.

That means...it's up to this traveling girl to slay the flying dragon.

“.....”

“.....”

The village chief and I both stared at her with blank expressions.



There was no avoiding it now that Amnesia had been entrusted with slaying the dragon. To that end, we decided to take a detour from our travels and head for the small wayside shrine where the dragon had made its home.

But before that, we had quite a lot of luggage, so we decided to find an inn. This village was not particularly accommodating to travelers. It had only the barest amenities. There was a single inn in the whole village.

“Hello there! You're looking forward to tonight, are ya? Well, welcome to our inn!”

The employee at the inn gave us a very odd greeting. She was a very beautiful

woman. Her name was Lana, and she was apparently the most beautiful girl in the whole village. She told us so herself. She could have stood to be a bit more humble, honestly.

“...Let’s see. Would you happen to be the ones going after the dragon?”

“...That’s, well...yes, that’s true...”

For some reason, Lana had her hand to her cheek, looking bashful. She was blushing. I wished she wouldn’t.

“Noble travelers, thank you so much. This is a rather humble way of showing our gratitude but allow us to provide your lodgings free of charge. Naturally, we invite you to stay in the most expensive room in the inn!”

Her offer was delightful, but I couldn’t help feeling melancholy when thinking of the bothersome feat of dragon slaying that awaited us.

“Seriously? Hooray! Elaina, she said it’s free!”

Amnesia was openly happy, though.

“I know. I can hear.”

I took the key from Lana, sighing all the while, and headed for our room.

“Amazing...! This is a top-class room! Look, Elaina! The bed is so soft and fluffy!”

As might be expected from a room listed as top class, the interior of our room for the night was the picture of luxury. Similar to a room at an inn I had found once in the middle of a forest, the single room was ridiculously spacious, containing both a bed and a sofa, plus a table. Aside from the minimal furniture, there were all sorts of random vases, a casual suit of armor, and mysterious paintings. Why do rich people like to put pointless things in their rooms, I wonder? It’s a mystery.

It was also a mystery why there was only one bed.

What should we do? I suppose one of us can sleep on the couch.

On a table in the center of the luxurious room, looking rather out of place, was a single, brand-new book.

“.....”

I opened it.

Inside was the handwriting of all sorts of different people. It read, *A long-awaited date with my boyfriend*, and *Today will be a day I will never forget*, and *I came with a girl I picked up in town*, and *I’m here with my teacher*, and so on.

.....

I see. This seems to be a room meant for couples.

...Why would they have us stay here?

“So we’ll be sleeping together?” Amnesia was sprawled on the bed, patting the space beside her.

“I’m thinking sofa.”

“For both of us?”

“.....”

I decided not to touch on her nonsense.

Well, I suppose we ought to think about which one of us is going to sleep in the bed after we come back from slaying the dragon. I postponed that problem and flung my baggage onto the bed.

“Amnesia, you should go with as little baggage as possible.”

“What should I bring?”

“Just the legendary sword or whatever.”

At any rate, I think we’ll be able to deal with the dragon quickly. And come to think of it, if we wrap this up quickly and get moving, we won’t have to worry about who sleeps where tonight.

“Travelers! Please be careful...! I can’t thank you enough for what you’re doing for my sake...”

It was right as we were heading out.

Lana was obviously concerned for our welfare and had prepared some sake. She even went as far as to tell us about a suspiciously convenient way of taking

down the dragon. "If you get the dragon to drink, it'll get drunk and you should be able to take it down easily!"

Perhaps it was out of some sense of responsibility. After all, Lana was supposed to have been on her way to the dragon's lair as a sacrifice by now.

"If you pretend to be me, you should be able to deceive the dragon!" she explained, and loaned me some of her clothes. Along with them, she handed me a letter, telling me, "Please read this right before you confront the dragon."

"....."

Reluctantly, I changed into Lana's clothes, and we left the village.

The plan was as follows.

I would go to the dragon's lair pretending to be Lana and somehow get the dragon to drink the sake. Then Amnesia would somehow fell the drunken dragon. Ideally, we would settle this without any complications... That was the strategy the villagers had thought up.

"Yeah, it's sure to go well with this plan!"

"....."

I thought it would be faster for me to blast the dragon with magic, but trying to argue with them would have been a real headache, so I stayed quiet.

The wayside shrine where the dragon lived was several hours' flight by broom from the village. It was surrounded by a stretch of unremarkable grassland, but the arched entrance had its mouth wide open, as if inviting us to come inside.

This place seemed like it had been here a long, long time. The bricks that made up the small shrine were cracked and blackened with the passing years.

It looked totally abandoned.

The whole place seemed more than a little ominous, like something terrible was sure to be lurking deep inside.

"Elaina...if I get into a pinch, help me out with some magic, okay?"

"No."

"You're so mean." Amnesia started crying.

I let it slide. It occurred to me that now must be the right time to read the letter that Lana had left with me.

I opened it.

Lana here.

I knew that.

If you are reading this letter, I suppose that means you've reached the dragon's shrine.

Wasn't that when you told me to read it? What was with this formal introduction?

However, there's something I really must discuss with you... Um, the thing is, in truth— I had made it about that far when Amnesia suddenly dashed off all by herself.

"The dragon's inside! Get ready!"

"Hang on...! Don't just go charging in!"

I read the letter while I was chasing after Amnesia.

So what's become of our strategy? What is this? Have you completely forgotten the plan that the villagers came up with? You dummy.

Amnesia rushed into the shrine.

So did I.

As we pressed forward into the cold, dim shrine, we were confronted with a lonely door.

The moment Amnesia saw it, she gave it a flying kick—"Raaahh!"

She was clearly being driven by a combination of stupidity and bloodlust. I hardly had time to think, trying to keep up with her.

I think playing the hero has her all riled up.

"...Who's there?"

The space beyond the door was shrouded in darkness.

A ghastly voice came from within the lightless depths.

“Disturbing my slumber—foolish humans. This merits death.”

From the inky blackness came an indication of something crawling.

I couldn’t make out the creature, but it was quite clear that it was angry.

...I don’t think the plan the villagers made is going to work now. There’s no way it’d just happily drink the sake we offered.

“...No helping it, huh.” I threw off Lana’s clothes, revealing my usual robes. I had worn them underneath, suspecting something like this might happen.

I gripped my wand and cast a spell.

It was just a light spell.

The tip of my wand glowed dazzlingly bright, illuminating the darkness.

With that, I could see the rest of the letter Lana had given me.

I don’t want you to kill the dragon. It will fall asleep as soon as it’s drunk on sake, so we want you to bring it back to the village while it’s slumbering.

That is what was written in the rest of the letter.

“...Who are you? Young girls? I thought you were the heroes here to kill me.”

The dopey voice coming from inside the shrine surely belonged to the dragon holed up in there.

But rather than a dragon, the figure that emerged was a young but otherwise totally ordinary human. Just a regular human girl. Really, it would be hard to pick out any way in which she differed from an entirely unremarkable human, but if I had to choose just one thing, it would probably be the wings growing from her back. Oh, or maybe the horns growing from her head. But really, that would be about it. Otherwise, totally normal.

“.....”

By the way, there was just a little bit more to the letter Lana had written.

It continued like this:

The dragon is my lover.

.....

This “dragon” looks more or less like a regular girl, though.



I ignored Lana’s request to bring the dragon back unconscious. I took her back to the village just as she was, ignoring the enraged villagers altogether, and dragged her before Lana.

“...What’s going on here?”

We conducted our inquiry in the suite where Amnesia and I were staying.

“Huh? What’s going on? I suppose you mean you want to know all the details about my romance with this sweet dragon? *Oh-ho-ho!*” laughed Lana.

“Well, frankly speaking, that is exactly what I’m asking.”

“It’ll take me a while to tell you that story—”

“Ah, keep it short and sweet.”

“.....”

Even with her spirits dampened, Lana told me the story. According to her, she and the dragon had first encountered each other fairly recently.

While taking a walk outside the village, she had come upon the dragon caught in a trap. The dragon had been very weak and on the verge of death. So Lana brought the dragon back to her inn and hid her from the other villagers as she secretly nursed her back to health.

By the way, the trap was one of those serrated blades that clamps down onto a leg. The dragon was obviously not very clever.

Anyway, once she had regained her strength, the dragon had returned to the small shrine where she had made her lair, but apparently— “...I just couldn’t get this girl out of my mind... In other words...I fell for her,” the dragon testified, blushing.

However, a love affair between a dragon and a human girl would never be permitted by the villagers. So the two of them were forced to date in secret, always on the lookout for prying eyes.

“But you know, eventually I had a thought. I decided I wanted to be with her twenty-four seven. I don’t want to hide our love!” the dragon exclaimed.

That seemed to be the situation.

This time, the dragon had come up with a sort of plan.

“First, I would threaten the village into bringing me the girl, right? And then they would bring her to me. And when they did, what do you think came next? That’s right. Marriage.”

I don’t get it...

Lana seemed to pick up on my expression. “To put it simply, we decided to create the narrative that ‘the dragon threatened the villagers and made them bring it a maiden to eat, but the maiden was so beautiful and kind, the dragon fell for her. Moved by its affection for the girl, the dragon has come to apologize for its poor manners and live together with the humans.’”

I see...? Wait. Do I? I don’t think I understand...

“But that’s not actually the way things went, right? What was the deal with the legendary sword or whatever?” I couldn’t help but feel like that had been a little suspicious.

Lana grew exasperated. “That’s exactly it! That’s the problem! What’s the deal with that sword?! Because of that stupid thing, they wouldn’t just send me out to the shrine!”

According to Lana, the original plan had been for her to go directly to the wayside shrine, and then for the two of them to return to the village at a suitable time of their choosing.

However, in the village was the legendary sword, and due to the well-meaning villagers’ attempts to save Lana, the situation had gotten a little complicated.

“So in the end, we settled on putting the dragon to sleep by getting her drunk on sake.”

“Well, looks like we couldn’t make that plan work, either, though—” Lana let out a sigh.

In other words, their whole scheme had ended in complete failure.

“So can we say you’re in a really bad situation?” Amnesia summarized the

conversation perfunctorily.

Well, I guess she isn't wrong.

"...That's right. Oh, what do we do...?" Lana clutched her head in her hands.

"Am I going to die here...?" The dragon also lowered her head.

"....." I looked at the two of them silently. Then, after a short pause, I asked, "By the way, Lana. Does this inn have a two-person suite?"

"Huh? Like this one?"

"I'm asking whether you have any rooms with two beds."

"That's, well...I do, but..."

"I see." I nodded.

I assumed quite the air of importance. "If you will transfer us to that other room, I have a good plan—Amnesia's cooperation is essential, though."

Amnesia just cocked her head and stared at me. "I don't see what's wrong with this room..."

"....."

I forced her to carry out my plan.



When Amnesia and I left the inn, we were greeted by the bitter objections of the villagers.

Just as when they had encircled the pedestal, they formed a ring with us at the center and pelted us with complaints.

"You've got to be kidding!"

"What's going on here?!"

"Hurry up and kill the dragon!"

Oh my. Quite angry, aren't you?

"Please calm down. The dragon is harmless. It will not hurt anyone."

"What a stupid thing to say! It tried to abduct Lana from the village!" The

village chief was scowling at me.

Amnesia was the one who answered the chief. She spoke boldly, holding the legendary sword in one hand. “Think for a minute! She seems like an ordinary girl! Do you honestly believe she could eat people?”

“She must have just taken on a human form!”

“That’s not true! I’m telling you all! She’s just a lonely dragon who honestly never had any intention of eating any humans. The truth is, she just wanted to be friends.”

“How can you say that?!”

“Because we met the dragon and had a proper conversation with her. Unlike you.” Amnesia grinned. It was an unassailable smile that left no room for counterargument.

“...But no, wait...there’s a chance you’re lying—”

“There absolutely isn’t.” Amnesia cut off the village chief’s words. “I mean—I did pull this out of the pedestal.”

Then she held the legendary sword overhead—the sword that, for generations, had been immovable by any but the most pure and tenderhearted. Someone so honest that they could not tell a lie, who always put others before themselves, an incredible specimen of humanity who could not even kill a bug.

Wasn’t this the best proof that she was telling the truth?

...Well, even I, a rotten specimen of humanity who always puts herself first, a liar with an impure mind, was able to pull it out, so I think the legend is fake.

“.....”

Using the sword to prove her honesty had been my idea. And of course, these people, who had all believed in the legend enough to try to pull the sword out, were swayed by the words of Amnesia, who had managed this impossible feat.

From the circle of people spilled low groans of astonishment. “...Wow...I see.”

Legend and superstition. To the people of this remote village, they carried tremendous weight.

...Seems like one could find lots of ways to make money using this sword, huh?

At this point in time, the devil in my mind paid another visit. *“Wouldn’t it be possible to snatch up everything of monetary value from this village if you got Amnesia to put on a little act?”*

You’ve got a point.

“No, wait a minute.” Arriving a little late was another devil. *“We can take the valuables, but let’s get the food, too. And while we’re at it, we can take the legendary sword to a pawnshop, heh-heh-heh...”*

Um, where’s the angel?

“She died.”

Seriously?

“Elaina.” Amnesia planted a hand on my shoulder. *“Don’t do anything bad, okay?”*

“.....”

The devils hanging around inside my head were purged.

That was how Amnesia succeeded in persuading the villagers and how we got transferred to a room with two beds. By the way, Amnesia returned the sword to the pedestal herself. I suppose it will never be used for dragon slaying again. Because there is no one who could wield it.

And they all lived happily ever after.



That night.

“...Huh? It’s not here. Mm.”

We had moved into the two-person room with two beds.

Amnesia was grumbling over by the bed opposite mine.

“What happened?” I was stretched out on my bed reading a book and glanced over at Amnesia.

“I can’t find my diary...”

“Huh?!” I jumped up. “Did...did you look? On top of the bed? In your jacket? In your bag?”

It was unthinkable to lose something so important.

How could she lose this most vital of objects, which told the story of her travels so far? Did she forget that her diary was important?

I searched for her diary in a panic, but it was nowhere to be found, and the night wore on as we turned everything in the room upside down.

I finally had an idea. “Don’t tell me—could you have left it in the previous room?”

If it wasn’t here, that meant it had to be somewhere else.

“Oh yeah!” Amnesia snapped her fingers and left the room in excitement.

As I was frantically searching my memory, I recalled the dragon and Lana had said something about staying in that luxury suite when we swapped rooms.

Several minutes later—

“.....It’s good.”

Amnesia opened the door.

She had returned with her face so red it looked like it would burn you if you touched it.

“...Did you find your diary?”

“.....Yes.”

“...Did something happen?”

“.....I...saw...nothing.”

“You saw something, huh?”

“.....AAAAAH!”

She crawled into bed, moaning incomprehensibly. “I’m going to bed! Don’t wake me up until I’m asleep!” She wriggled down into her blankets with this nonsensical instruction.

...What on earth were those two doing...?

Well, I'm sure I don't really want to know...

The diary had been safely retrieved. It was sitting on the table.

“.....”

Absorbed in reading my book, I waited for Amnesia's breathing to grow heavy with sleep. When I say “book,” I guess it's not one, technically speaking. I was reading a guest book. It contained the accounts of the people who had stayed in this room. It was different from the one I had found in the suite, as the people staying in this room seemed to mostly have been travelers or adventurers who had recorded useful information and interesting stories about neighboring countries. It seemed that every person who had stayed here was kind, for all the information in the guest book was beneficial. On the other hand, a few travelers had written down some rather embarrassing details.

It was a chaotic book. It was full of useful information but reading some of the entries made your skin crawl.

However, there was not a single scrap of information about the Holy City, where Amnesia and I were headed. As expected, information did not leak out so easily about the mysterious city.

.....

I took a pen in hand and turned to a brand-new page.

Since whoever read this was likely to suddenly recall our tale sometime, someplace, I decided I had better at least write a story that wasn't boring. Because boring or useless stories were the most quickly forgotten.

For example, I could probably write an interesting tale about what happened today.

By the time I had finished writing that, Amnesia was breathing deeply in her sleep, and I was growing rather tired, so I wriggled down into my bed.

It didn't take long for me to fall asleep, too.



“Did you enjoy your time last night? Thank you so much for your patronage!”

After saying good-bye to Lana, who gave us her usual strange greeting, we got

back to our journey. The dragon had been standing beside her the whole time. They were even holding hands.

...Very intimately.

I mounted my broom, and Amnesia climbed on, clinging to me from behind.

Sitting one behind the other, we headed off toward the Holy City, Esto.

We were propelled onward by the sincere belief that we were growing closer to recovering her memories.

“Hey, what happened to the last page in my diary?” Amnesia said from behind me on the broom. “Oh, someone wrote something here...and it’s...oh... my goodness!”

Well, I think probably either the dragon or Lana had mistaken Amnesia’s diary for the guest book furnished with the room and written in it...

I hadn’t said anything about that to her since she woke up.

“What happened? I’m afraid I have no clue.”

For now, I gave a rather vague answer while chuckling to myself.

“You’re lying! You definitely know something, Elaina!” Amnesia was pushing hard on my back.

Someone’s cranky.

When I glanced at her sideways, she had her cheeks puffed up in anger.

“Well, I know what happened when you went to take your diary back.”

“Tell me, now.”

“Nope.”

“Tell me.”

“Nope.”

We continued on our way, having this silly exchange.

As we flew, I thought that if Amnesia’s memory returned and she visited that village and read my guest book entry...if that were to happen, her face was sure to go bright red once again.



CHAPTER 9

A City on Ice

A broom carrying two girls soared over the spring plains.

It weakly bobbed from side to side as it was propelled forward.

“Are you sure we’re going in the right direction?”

A black robe and pointy hat. The witch with a star-shaped brooch pinned to her breast posed the question to the girl sitting next to her. As indicated on the map that she had spread out with both hands, if they continued in this direction for a long time, the Holy City, Esto, should be ahead. But it was absolutely nowhere to be seen.

The girl sitting next to the witch peered at the map. “Hmm...I think so? It’s circled with a note that says ‘Around Here!’ See? That settles it!”

“Settles what?”

Sure enough, the map did have a note reading *Around Here!* but the girls were sure that they had already entered the area circled on the map. In other words, had they already arrived? Really? It was just an empty field. There was nothing—just blue skies and open plains stretching on forever. *But I guess we’re here? Are you an idiot?*

“...Well, for the time being, let’s go a little farther and then reassess our situation.” The witch controlled the urge to say something mean and replied in an adult way, feigning calm composure.

Who on earth could she be?

That’s right. She’s me.

“Suppose so,” said the person beside her, whose name was Amnesia. “Well, it’ll work out somehow. It seems like we’re close, anyway.”

“.....”

She has a hopelessly laid-back, happy-go-lucky personality.

We had been traveling together for about a week, but since Amnesia lost her memory whenever she slept, I couldn't sense any progress in our relationship.

The broom beneath us, on the other hand, continued to progress...toward the Holy City, Esto.

"Mmph."

I was taken by surprise as Amnesia suddenly embraced me.

The broom bucked, threatening to shake us off.

"What is this, sexual harassment? I dare you to keep this up," I snapped after straightening the broom back out. I think I was looking angrier by the minute.

"No, it's because the broom was swaying. I thought I'd better hold on."

How can you say that with a straight face?

"It's going to sway more if you hold on to me."

"Then I'll just have to hold you tighter, huh? Got it!"

Are you hearing yourself?

"If you do that, the broom is going to fly wildly out of control."

"What? Does your broom get angry when we're flirting?"

"Not the broom. I'm the one who's angry."

"Ah, don't tell me you're embarrassed? How cute!"

"....."

It had taken me a few days to realize that even though we had to meet each other for the first time every single day, her sunny disposition was part of her basic nature. Despite repeating the cycle of meeting and parting daily, she didn't seem the least bit bothered.

.....

So even though our relationship hadn't made any progress, I felt like we had started out quite close anyway.

"Elaina, you're so warm!"

"...Sigh..."

Fine, whatever. But how long are you planning on clinging to me?

I let out a sigh and fixed my gaze beyond the tip of the broom.

And then we entered a forest.

"...Hmm? It's chilly."

We had only traveled through the forest a short while when Amnesia pulled away from me and spoke in a puzzled voice.

Immediately after her body heat peeled away, the wind rushed through the gap created between us, and her warmth vanished.

It was early spring. Until just a moment ago, we had been enjoying the fine weather, and yet before we knew it, the wind had chilled us through like a deep winter gale. A bit of shade was hardly enough to cause this kind of chill.

"...Looks like it's not just cold weather."

I had only just begun to feel the cold, and we were already lost in another dimension.

It began to snow.

Our breath was cloudy white, and the small, cold flakes fluttered as they passed us by. Any snow that landed on our cheeks melted and disappeared, flowing down in little droplets.

We found ourselves moving through a picturesque winter forest.

"What on earth...? Isn't this a bit much, even for extreme weather? Is this the kind of thing that happens often?"

"....." I shook my head slowly. *"No, you don't really hear about it..."*

We looked out over the scenery streaming past us. The strange thing about it was that everything was blanketed in blue-white snow that glittered even in what little sunlight could reach it. Nowhere were there any signs that the snow had been disturbed, no tracks at all. Only from time to time, the trees growing under the blanket of snow would tilt their heads, as if they had just remembered something, and deposit the snow onto the ground. The falling

flakes would begin covering the new green with white once again.

In one section of the spring forest, winter had come.

“I suppose it would be possible to create this phenomenon using a spell, but...”

The more I thought about it, the stranger it became.

A spell to change the weather would require a significant amount of magical energy. What would be their motivation for this? I didn’t understand the merits.

“Maybe they like winter?” Amnesia was looking vacantly up at the sky.

“...Oh!” Just as I was about to answer her, I spied the edge of the forest. I could see the light shining through the trees. “Well, I suppose we can ask them later,” I said optimistically.

Talking cheerfully as we took in the scenery, we emerged from the forest on my broom—and immediately realized that everything we had imagined about the place had been wrong.

“...What is this?” Amnesia mumbled in confusion as she alighted from the broom, which I had brought to a stop.

“.....” I stood beside her.

Beyond the forest—on cleared land—was a city.

Or at least a place that had once been a city.

“...I think it’s safe to say they weren’t big fans of winter.”

There was a land where all the humans and the buildings—everything, without exception—was frozen in place.



If the forest had been white, the city was blue.

The ground was completely covered in a thick layer of ice. It looked like one wrong step would send you slipping. There was snow falling, but any flakes that stuck to the ice soon fused to it and disappeared. Maybe because of that, the ice was ever so slightly wet, meaning that the ground was fairly slick and very difficult to walk over.

On the large avenue, flanked with tall buildings, the people still looked like they were going about their business, except all of them were completely encased in ice.

“I wonder if they’re alive...,” Amnesia said as she tapped on the foreheads of the pedestrians frozen in the middle of the street.

“If they were frozen by a spell, there’s a chance they’re still alive. Ice spells often incorporate time-suspending magic, you know.”

“Umm...meaning?”

“Meaning it’s likely they’re alive inside.”

“...Really? Isn’t magic a bit too convenient?”

“It’s magic. Isn’t convenience the whole point?”

“Is that how it is?”

“That’s how it is.”

The frozen city was far colder than the forest had been. The very air itself seemed to be frosty, too.

As you would expect, we couldn’t just pass by a city under such a strange spell without stopping to take a look, and besides, we couldn’t shake the haunting feeling that the punchline was that this was the Holy City, Esto. We embarked upon a thorough investigation of the city.

“...But everything is frozen. There’s nothing here!”

My companion began complaining about ten minutes into our operation. Incidentally, in those ten or so minutes, she had slipped and fallen down no fewer than ten times.

“I’m gonna break my butt,” she said, but I let it pass.

“Come on, pull yourself together. All right, stand up.” She was on the ground, and I pulled her up.

“...Ouch,” cried Amnesia.

“Why are you in tears? Aren’t you a knight or something?”

At least, according to your clothing anyway.

“Knights feel pain!” She turned serious. “Besides, I don’t even remember whether or not I was a knight.”

“I don’t really know how to respond to that. Let’s move on to another topic...”

“You don’t have to walk on eggshells around me. I bet I said the same thing yesterday, right?”

“Not just yesterday. You say it every single day.”

“I’m going to keep saying it tomorrow, too. Thanks for putting up with me.”

I wish she would spare me the gratitude.

I sighed. “...But why is someone in your predicament dressed up like a knight?”

Amnesia shrugged in exasperation. “You’ll never know until you can ask the version of me who put on these clothes.”

Somehow, she didn’t seem to be that interested, even though we were talking about her personal circumstances. *I suppose if she’s this cheerful after losing her memory, she must have been sunshine and rainbows before this all happened.*

“For now, let’s head to the palace,” I said, bending over to swat away some dirt that had stuck to her backside.

“Is there something there?”

“Whenever I don’t know what’s going on, I usually understand if I go to the palace.”

I straightened back up.

Fortunately, the palace was situated directly down the road we were on.

Like everything else, it was encased in ice, but it would provide a bird’s-eye view of the surrounding area.

“At any rate, the people of this country are kind of strange, huh?” Amnesia said after we had been walking down the road for a little while, as she traced one of the frozen people with her finger. “Everyone looks frightened of

something.”

She was right. The pedestrians—suspended in ice—all wore distorted expressions, looking exactly as if they had witnessed something horrific. One person had been frozen mid-leap. Another had been prostrating themselves. One individual had been calmly standing their ground. Another had been cowering in despair.

It was clear they had not been shut up inside the permafrost at their own request.

That much I understood just by walking down the road.

“Plus, hey, look at this. The ice doesn’t melt.” Amnesia showed me her white fingertip—totally dry without a single drop of moisture on it. “Earlier, I got a bit curious and tried striking it with my sword, but I couldn’t make a single scratch on it. It’s less like ice and more like crystal.”

“But it’s cold.”

“All right, it’s like cold crystal.”

“.....”

Imitating her, I traced my finger over the ice. An icy chill instantly coiled up my finger. However, that was the only thing that came from it. The ice did not melt even the least little bit, and there was nothing stuck to my fingertip. When I pulled my finger away, only the cold of the ice stayed with me.

“Okay.”

As a test, I pulled out my wand and rained flames down on the ice.

The result was the same. The fire had certainly scorched the ice, but it didn’t melt.

It was still there, still frozen, unchanged.

...It appears to be unmelting ice.

Why would someone bother creating this...?

“I was hoping this was all fake,” Amnesia admitted.

“Yeah, me too...”

However, it was much too elaborate to be fake. Plus, that wouldn't explain the extreme weather.

I was certain there was something going on here that we hadn't figured out.

However... Waiting for us at the palace was just more of this world locked away in ice.

"There's really nothing here, is there?"

With the building itself frozen, we weren't even able to go inside. In other words, there was nothing to say except that we didn't know anything.

"I'm going to try looking down on the town from above with my broom."

I took it out and looked at Amnesia. If everything in this city was completely covered with ice, then we would know there was no longer anything here. If there were any unfrozen places, we could think about what to do then.

At any rate, I was thinking it would be best for us to give up quickly and change course back toward the Holy City.

However...

"Wait...there's someone there."

At that moment, Amnesia's expression changed. Her gaze had fallen on the shadows of a frozen house. She put her hand on her sword, still staring intensely at a single point.

I also drew my wand a beat later. I was gripping my broom in my right hand and my wand in my left.

"You over there, who are you?"

When she spoke up the second time, the thing emerged from its hiding place.

"....."

It is difficult to describe.

It was shaped like a girl. Black hair dangled loosely over its face, and in the gaps between hair floated lifeless eyes. It was wearing filthy, shredded rags.

It had probably once been a witch. On its head was a pointy hat, upon its

breast was a star-shaped brooch, and in its hand, it gripped a wand.

But strangest of all was that all over its body were spots where ice crystals were growing. We could see them from the gaps in the scraps of cloth that once were a robe. And on its face and legs. Ice was growing out of it like parasitic mushrooms on a tree.

“.....”

Dragging its legs, the thing walked slowly toward us.

“Don’t come over here!” She must have sensed the danger to her person immediately. Amnesia had already drawn the saber that she kept at her hip. “I don’t know where you’re from or who or what you are, but—if you come any closer, I’ll slice through you!”

“.....”

Her words didn’t seem to make it to the ears of the thing.

Slowly dragging one leg behind it, the creature did not stop.

“...Doesn’t look like you heard me.”

“.....”

“Are you the one who did this?”

“.....”

Her words washed over the creature in a one-sided exchange. There was no reply. It just continued walking intently.

It closed the distance between them bit by bit. Amnesia backed away. “What is with this girl—”

“.....!”

Its hand squirmed. With a repulsive, unnatural movement, like a creeping insect, it readied its wand and pointed it at Amnesia.

A stream of ice blasted from the wand.

“Watch out!”

I blew Amnesia out of the way with a spell, and immediately after, an icicle

formed in the place where she had been standing.

“Wha—?”

If the attacker’s spell had landed, Amnesia would surely have ended up like all the other people here. “I’m starting to think this is the culprit who froze the city!”

“Looks that way.” I readied my wand again.

Because the thing had already shifted the target of its attack from Amnesia to me.

“.....”

It waved its wand again, shooting out more ice.

I was sure a single blast would be powerful enough to freeze me head to toe. As I dodged blast after blast, I waved my own wand, sending out balls of magical energy to keep the attacks in check.

But—

“...It’s like they have no effect on you.”

The creature did not so much as flinch as I bombarded it with magical energy again and again. I felt as powerless as if I were casting spells at a huge tree.

“.....”

It was still staring right at me. Its colorless eyes were as black as the abyss and showed not the slightest bit of emotion.

Who had this *thing* once been? And what on earth was its purpose here?

It was all a mystery, but one thing was crystal clear—the creature before our eyes was trying to kill us, no doubt.

“.....”

Yet again, I readied my wand. “This should do it—”

I fired a heat ray. The single stream of scorching thermal energy, hot enough to melt blood and meat and earth and ice and air and anything else it might encounter, engulfed the human-shaped thing in an instant.

Rays of light were blinding, glinting off of every surface in the frozen city.

I was certain that not even my twisted opponent could resist a spell of this magnitude.

That's what I thought.

I thought this would surely end the threat.

I was convinced.

"....."

However—

"—It can't be."

Oh, this is bad, I thought.

I suddenly understood very clearly that I'd never had any hope of defeating the thing.

My scorching ray of heat had been frozen. Ice was flowing upstream toward me from the humanoid monster, coating over my heat ray. It had even been able to freeze heat itself.

Even the bits of the heat ray that had scattered. Even the attack coming out of my wand. The ice had even swallowed up my left hand.

"...Tch." I clicked my tongue in frustration. I could no longer move my left hand.

"....."

On top of that, I could see the monster beyond the frozen heat ray, looking entirely unscathed. Nothing could have made me angrier.

I thought I would have done at least a little bit of damage.

That didn't have any effect at all. What is that thing?

"Elaina...!" Amnesia wore a miserable expression as she started to rush over to me. "Wait! I'm gonna help you!"

What are you talking about?

There's nothing you can do. Our icy opponent isn't even affected by a heat ray.

“Sorry. It seems I’m kind of done for.”

I let go of the broom in my right hand and let it drift.

I took out a fresh wand. “I’m sorry.”

In this dire situation, even in my current state, I felt as calm as could be.

I cast a spell on my free-floating broom with the wand in my right hand. “Take care of her.” I sent it flying off.

The broom kept to my instructions faithfully, cutting a straight path through the sky to Amnesia.

“Huh...?” It hooked itself on Amnesia’s clothes and took her far away from me. “Elaina...? What’re you...doing?”

“You need to escape. I don’t think I’m going to make it.”

It doesn’t seem like I can move from this spot. I’m locked in place.

“.....”

And that thing is still coming after me.

Checkmate.

“But, if you do that, you’ll—”

“It’s fine.”

“But—!”

As if to interrupt her, the broom whizzed off, carrying her by her clothing. It wasn’t long before she disappeared from sight.

“.....”

The thing watched her go as if looking at something curious.

I suppose it’s thinking about going after her. It seems driven to pursue anything that moves. That, and I guess it’s registering me as someone who can’t fight anymore.

That gets on my nerves.

I pointed my one free arm at the thing.

“I suppose you think you’ve already beaten me?”

It turned around. As if it had just remembered I existed.

“.....”

“Why don’t you say something?”

Fine. Whatever.

“...I’m not going to give up, you know. I hate the idea of it all ending in a cold place.”

If I was to freeze here... If I was to remain for eternity like the rest of this city—like all these people...

At the very least, I’d like to put on a good show.

“I’m going to put up a real fight, so prepare yourself—”

I fired off some spells.

I’m leaving the rest up to you, I silently pleaded to anyone who might be listening.



“Wait...! Let me go! Let go! If we leave like this, Elaina will...!”

I drifted through the sky, dragging along a piece of oversized baggage.

In the cold air, she was kicking and struggling on my handle, with her robe drawn up around the scruff of her neck. She looked just like a kitten being carried away by its parent.

“Why you...! To be manhandled by a mere broom...! Gah!” She was thrashing her hands around, trying to separate her robe from me, so I continued to restrict her movements by veering back and forth in a zigzag pattern.

It’s extremely rude to call me “a mere broom.” Who do you think you are?

The changes to my body began to occur after we had flown a little bit farther and put plenty of distance between us and Mistress Elaina.

At exactly the right moment, I said, “Please calm yourself, Mistress Amnesia.”

After I had tossed Mistress Amnesia to the ground, I landed. She fell onto her

backside yet again, and I very calmly pointed my brush end downward and stood upright.

Immediately afterward, my figure changed from that of an ordinary broom into a different form.

“...Huh? Elaina?” Mistress Amnesia looked up at me with teary eyes, dumbfounded.

“I am a broom.”

“Huh? No, but...? What? Oh, well, your hair color is...different.” I could almost see the many question marks floating above her head as she was gripped by a state of shock.

Certainly, my hair was pink, and Mistress Elaina’s was gray—but other than that, we were almost identical, so it was not surprising that I had been mistaken for her.

“Mistress Elaina cast a spell on me earlier and gave me this form. She uses a spell that changes objects into a human shape,” I explained, but she still seemed confused.

“...Huh? What on earth...?” she asked.

...This is a waste of time, so let’s try to wrap up the explanation.

“I am a broom. I have been given Mistress Elaina’s form. As such, I look like this. And right now, we are in the middle of escaping from that monster back there.”

“...!” At that point, Amnesia’s expression changed, and she bolted upright. “That’s right...! We have to go help Elaina!”

“No.”

I grabbed Mistress Amnesia by the scruff of her neck as she tried to run off. Oddly enough, we found ourselves in the same arrangement as when we had been flying earlier, even though I had changed forms.

“Tch—let me go!” She scowled at me.

“How do you intend to fight against an opponent even Mistress Elaina is no

match for?”

“That’s...”

“While I am moved by your sense of obligation and responsibility, I’d like you to consider why she might have sent you far away.”

“.....” Her insistent tugging at my arm tapered off.

“Have you composed yourself?”

She turned around to face me, looking like she might cry at any moment.

“I have to help Elaina...but there’s nothing I can do...”

“.....”

“...Say, Miss Broom? Did Elaina send me away so I could summon help?”

“.....”

“I won’t even remember her face tomorrow, you know that...? Even if I were to go for help, it’s a certainty that if I go to sleep, I won’t remember a thing about Elaina or about this place. Even if I leave myself a note, there’s no way of knowing how seriously I might take it tomorrow.”

“.....”

“I’m afraid of forgetting her...! That’s why—”

She has never known a morning without Mistress Elaina. She has never known a single day without her friend telling her about herself when she opens her eyes.

To this girl with no memories, having Mistress Elaina in her life must be incredibly important. She has someone who will tell her who she is again. That alone must give her an incredible peace of mind.

That must be why she depends on Mistress Elaina more than necessary. That must be why this girl can be so happy-go-lucky.

However, I know how much work Mistress Elaina does to give her that peace of mind. How she waits for her to awaken every morning, how she stays with her constantly while they travel, how she watches her at night until she falls asleep, and so much more.

But Mistress Elaina is now encased in ice. And all the fear that Mistress Amnesia had pushed down into the deep recess of her mind must be surging up and overwhelming her.

I suppose it's only normal that it would break her composure.

"If you decide to fall into self-loathing after being crushed by your sense of obligation and responsibility, that is your choice to make. But please consider *why* Mistress Elaina might have given me a human form."

".....?"

"From the outset, she had not the least intention of putting this matter off until tomorrow."

While wiping away the tears that had accumulated in Mistress Amnesia's eyes, I pointed with my finger.

There stood a single large mansion.

Among these people and buildings that were all encased in ice, Mistress Elaina must have thought: *If there's nothing here but ice, then maybe we should hear what the ice has to say.*

That must be why she changed me into human form and entrusted me with unraveling the mysteries of this place.

Her intuition had turned out to be correct.

"Look ahead of you." "The building straight ahead." "Go there." "Hurry up." "Straight ahead." "Pick up the case."

Since the moment we had entered the city, I had been shutting them out—the rambling words of the ice that surrounded us were terribly loud.

"I'm certain if we go there, we will understand everything."

It was a single large building, a mansion, and the only thing in this frozen city that stood free of the ice.



Perhaps because the other buildings around it were all frozen, the mansion felt awfully cold, even inside.

When we exhaled, our breath was cloudy white before spreading thin and disappearing into the chilly air. The light shining in through the windows swayed gently like curtains.

“The name of the owner of this mansion is the Great Witch Rudela...or so it appears.”

The broom lady walking beside me could hear the voices of the wind or something, and from time to time would suddenly tilt her head and give some information that she found out from who knows where. It was mysterious, but I thought that even if I asked her to tell me more details, I probably wouldn't understand anyway, so I just stayed quiet and nodded along. After all, to tell the truth, this occasion of a broom standing and walking around was too perplexing, and I was having trouble following along.

“It's the room farthest toward the back.” Miss Broom tugged hard at my sleeve.

We proceeded down a long corridor.

Without hesitation, Miss Broom opened the doors at the end and let me pass. “All right, go ahead.”

“...What's in here?”

To all appearances, it was a private room that could have been anywhere and belonged to anyone. It was barely furnished with spartan fixtures—a desk and a bed, plus a bookshelf.

Miss Broom did not answer my question and moved as if this was not her first time coming here. As if she was being guided by the voice of someone else, she headed for the desk and picked up the letter that was sitting on it.

“This is it.” She handed me the letter.

It was covered in dust and looked very old.

“And this is?”

“Well now, it seems to be something written by the Great Witch Rudela.”

“.....”

Why do you know that...?

“I am able to hear the voices of objects, you know. This is an object.”

As if she saw right through me, Miss Broom let out a quiet chuckle.

Can she hear the thoughts that are in my mind, too...?

“...If I read this, I’ll know how to turn Elaina back to normal?”

“.....” She didn’t answer me.

In any case, it seemed I was meant to read it.

I took the letter from her hands. Glancing sidelong at Miss Broom, who was already wandering away again as if guided by someone else, I opened the letter.

The dusty smell of mildew wafted into the air.

There on that page was the history of the country.

Hello there. I am the Great Witch Rudela.

I wrote this letter for no other purpose than for you to read it. I know not where you come from or who you may be, but I drew this up because I want you to save the people of this city.

To put it plainly, I am the reason this city is frozen. The blame lies with me.

However, please understand there were extenuating circumstances that led me to take this course of action. Despite my wishes, I had no other choice but to do this, temporarily, to save the city.

It all began a year ago—though I say that not knowing just how far into the future you may be reading this, so I suppose it will probably be more than one year in the past.

Anyway, one year before I wrote this letter, a plague began to spread across this land.

It is a terrible disease by which the skin becomes inflamed and the body is wracked with a burning fever. From the onset, it takes just a few days for the infected to pass away.

Its origin is unknown. After the first person contracted the illness, there was a

sudden outbreak. The plague ripped through the countryside with terrifying speed.

I was commissioned by the king to concoct a cure with all haste.

I paid frequent visits to the sick, gathered blood samples, and created medicines. Day after day, I repeated this exercise.

However, never mind the source of the disease, I never even understood how to cure it. No matter what kind of medicines I made, they had absolutely no effect.

Citizens died in droves, suffering until the bitter end.

And as the plague continued to spread, a rumor began to circulate.

—A rumor that Rudela the Witch might be the one who had brought about this plague.

I suspect the citizens began to hold suspicions against me because I was never stricken by the disease, despite frequently visiting the sick in the midst of a countrywide pandemic.

The rumors themselves spread like a second plague. Rumor begets rumor, and before long, it becomes popular opinion. The citizens stopped greeting me, and even when I went to their houses to try to heal them, they would refuse me entry.

I became something of a pariah.

However, I didn't even mind that so much.

To be honest, I wasn't overly fond of the people here. I mean, I've never been a people person. Always hated them, really. I always keep up a friendly appearance, of course, but I really only bother with the most basic interactions. That's the kind of person I am.

Anyway, I did not stop my study of the disease.

This was wholly due to my feelings of patriotism.

I love my homeland, where I was born. I may hate people, but what led me to research a cure for the plague was a simple sense of obligation and of duty.

That was why there was no way I was going to quit.

Eventually, the plague sank its teeth into the king himself.

Time had run out, and if I wasn't able to solve the mystery within a few days, it was crystal clear that this country would fall to ruin.

I was at my wits' end. The people eyed me with suspicion; not a soul trusted me. I had stones thrown at me as I walked down the street, and some people who had lost family members to the plague even came at me with knives.

Oh, this is hopeless, I thought.

At that point, I had to make a decision.

I was out of time.

I'm sure that now, the scenery around you appears to be frozen. Strictly speaking, it is not ice that you're looking at.

To save the city, it was essential for me to buy some time. And so I preserved the whole town, suspending it in time after the spread of the plague.

I'm sure I appeared as a frightful figure to the people here as I went around freezing everything in the city. However, they would not listen to a word I said, so I had little choice in the matter.

After everything in the city was completely frozen, I could devote myself to the study of the disease, alone.

Even if I had gained time by freezing the city, it wouldn't mean anything if I couldn't solve the problem.

My research went on for a long time, but eventually I was able to unravel the mystery of the illness that had started spreading so suddenly.

The origin lay in a nearby country—the Holy City, Esto.

Apparently, that country has been experimenting with some questionable magic, and as a by-product, corrupted magical energy turned into a toxin and polluted the water discharged into the river. That was probably what caused my countrymen to fall one after the other, while I was spared. I have a certain resistance to magical energy, while they did not. That's all there is to it.

Once I understood the cause, the solution was simple.

I immediately devoted my energy to the development of a vaccine.

However, there was a problem.

About a year had passed since I had frozen the city, and despite my magical resistance, the corruption had eventually begun eating into me. Each time a part of my body became infected, I froze the diseased part to halt the progress of the illness and continued working relentlessly on the vaccine.

Finally, the cure was completed.

By the way, do you see snow falling outside the window?

That snow is the very vaccine I created. The snow that combines with the ice, melting and adhering to it, should eventually cure the illness plaguing these people.

However, this is the end of the line for me.

Freezing my body bit by bit must have had some negative side effects. Or else I must have used up too much magical energy making the vaccine.

The snow has not healed my illness, though neither has the disease progressed. All that has gradually faded away is my humanity.

Already I can feel my mind fading. My head feels empty, and it's getting hard to control my body. Simply writing these words requires every ounce of effort I can muster.

I'm glad I could last long enough to make the vaccine. However, I don't have the energy left to melt the ice. I fear my beloved home will remain preserved in ice for all eternity.

There is only one way to melt it. If I die, the source of the magical energy that froze the city will die with me, and the ice should go away.

There is no other way than that.

And so I entreat you.

Please kill me—

The letter ended there.

The extremely unsettling note read less like words and more like a scratching of unrecognizable symbols. It was, in fact, a desperate entreaty to anyone who might read it.

She wanted us to kill her.

The letter had concluded with those heavy words.

“Mistress Amnesia.”

Miss Broom came back exactly as I finished reading. In her hand, she was holding a large scrap of cloth.

“...What is that?”

“It was in the other room.”

She spread the fabric out. It looked like a cloak made from rags. She stared at it with all seriousness. “It is likely that Mistress Rudela predicted something of our present circumstance. This appears to be a cloak that can nullify her magic.”

“.....”

How do you know? I no longer had the energy to ask. I was sure it was something she heard from the voices of the objects.

“Miss Broom, do you know what was in the letter?”

“More or less.”

“...I see.”

“Yes.”

I took the cloak from her hands. “...So we have to kill her.”

“.....” She averted her gaze. “At present, it’s safe to say there is no other way.”

“...Seems to be the case.”

“...I’m terribly sorry. This dirty job is something that I should take on, not a human, I think. But—” She stared at her own hands.

The spell that Elaina had cast on her must have already been coming to an end, because her body was starting to fade away, and she was growing

translucent. I could see the other side of the room right through her.

Miss Broom did not have very much time left.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.” I held my trembling hands in check. “Actually, this kind of duty is ideal for me, you know?”

—*Because I’m going to forget about it tomorrow.*

“Mistress Amnesia.” Suddenly, a warm sensation enveloped my body. Miss Broom’s voice was coming from somewhere very close, and when she continued speaking, I realized that she was embracing me. “You have no reason to feel any responsibility or sense of duty. Even if you were to run away, there is no one who would begrudge you.”

“.....”

“So please. Follow your heart and act as you see fit—because if you don’t, then in time, you are certain to lose the ability to act on your own.”

She embraced me all the more strongly. She seemed like she would fade away at any moment, but she was so warm I thought I might melt. It was hot. It burned.

I brought my dangling arms up around her.

“Thank yo—”

However, that moment, Miss Broom disappeared.

She slipped through my hands, and an ordinary broom clattered to the floor. She left behind only the faintest sensation of her presence.

I was left behind as the only person in this frozen city.

I had no other choice.

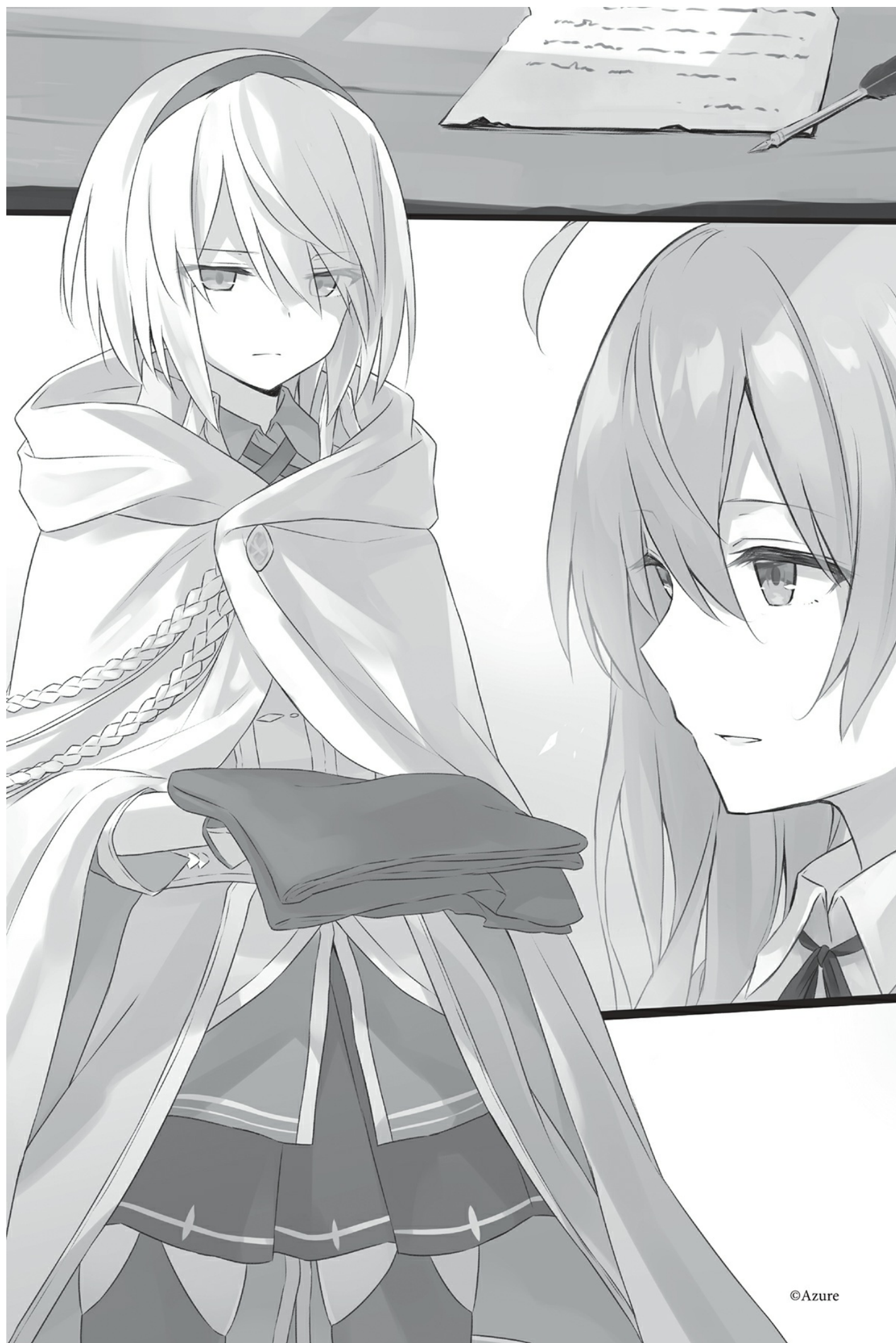


Snow was falling outside, drifting down slowly.

Covering my body, the cloak absorbed the snow and became slightly tinged with moisture.

No matter where I walked in the ice-covered city, the scenery did not change, and I knew neither how long I had been outside nor how long I would have to

keep wandering around.



“.....”

From the other side of the icy city, the creature that was formerly Rudela appeared, dragging its leg. It was certain there was no humanity remaining inside of her.

When she caught sight of me, the woman with ice crystals growing from inside her body pointed her wand at me and immediately blasted me with icy cold.

“.....Tch!”

The ice broke apart when it struck the cloak I had gotten from Miss Broom, and the cold dissipated in the air. *Oh, thank goodness, it actually worked.* Feeling slightly relieved, I stepped forward firmly, one foot at a time.

Struggling under the onslaught of magical ice, my footfalls felt very, very heavy. It felt like I would collapse the moment I stopped trying.

Feeling many times as if I was about to slip, I placed a hand on my saber where it rested beneath the cloak.

It rattled noisily with my trembling.

Before I lost my memory, I was probably no stranger to battle. This is fine.

If I don't do this, I won't get Elaina back. There's no other way.

Rudela is prepared to die. Nothing about this is sad.

Repeating these excuses in my mind, I closed the distance between us one step at a time.

“.....”

And then...

“I'm sorry.”

I stabbed her.

My saber pierced through the cloak and into the chest of the creature that had been Rudela. The blade sank deep into her, sliding smoothly through the gap between bones.

My chest hurt. It was almost like I was the one on the receiving end.

The blood that leaked from Rudela's breast traveled down my blade and fell in thick drops onto the ice. The frost magic streaming from her wand ceased, and she dropped it as her hand went limp.

Rudela's body collapsed onto me. Her head slammed down onto my shoulder. She was heavy.

"—Thank you."

Heavy, too, were the words that she breathed into my ear.

Those words were her last, and she didn't move again.

I couldn't say anything.

I was certain I would never tell this part of the tale. To whom? To Elaina.

There's no way I could tell her...that I killed someone for her sake.



"Oh, Madam Witch, I really feel terrible about this." As I was restoring the city, the king approached me with a low chuckle.

I shook my head and continued my work. "No, no. It's my way of apologizing for destroying your city."

"But you defeated that woman for us. Even if the buildings are a little worse for wear, it's clear that was a necessary sacrifice. You certainly didn't need to go to such great lengths!"

"I won't be satisfied unless I do. And at any rate, I'm glad no one was injured," I replied and got back to work.

The humanlike thing. I had been frozen during my fight with the creature that had been difficult to describe. When I had returned to normal, I'd found the buildings around me were thoroughly demolished.

Oh crap, I had thought, and started repairing them immediately.

While I was doing that, the townspeople around me had started making a fuss: "Did you defeat that monster for us, Miss Witch?!"

We had arrived at the present situation, in which the king came over specially to greet me.

It's not as if I was the one who actually defeated that thing...

Even after I was finished with my work, the king was trying to get on my good side.

"You really helped us out! We were trapped in a long nightmare on account of that evil witch. If you hadn't saved us, we might have stayed like that in the ice for all eternity..."

"...Yeah?"

He keeps piling on the praise, but it's not like I was the one who saved them.

In fact, I was frozen, too.

"....."

Amnesia, the one who had actually saved the country, just stood behind me the whole time, hanging her head, not uttering a word, not even moving.

I didn't have even the slightest idea what had happened.

Amid the cheerful citizens, delighted to have their freedom back, she alone was somber. She looked so heartbroken, I couldn't even bring myself to say anything to her.

"We wish to show our gratitude to the witches who killed that devil for us, so how about it?" the king asked. "We should commemorate this day. Let us etch it into eternity as the day that devil was vanquished from our land."

"....."

"How about it? Won't you allow us to show you our gratitude? We'd like to provide you with treasure, or anything else you might desire. Ah, and do you have a bit of time to spare? If you're amenable, I shall have a first-rate feast prepared for you at the palace!"

"....."

He's in quite a festive mood. Is it really such a joyous occasion?

I don't really understand what's going on.

“How about it?” the king, in his good humor, asked me again, rather insistently.

“—We can’t,” someone said in a small voice while pulling firmly on my robe. When I turned to look, I saw Amnesia looking down darkly and shaking her head ever so slightly.

Those were the first words she had uttered since the ice had melted.

I had absolutely no idea what had transpired. However, I did understand that something awful had happened to her, something she couldn’t even put into words.

I turned back to face the king.

“Please don’t go to the trouble. We’re in a hurry to move on. We are travelers, after all.”



It had already stopped snowing outside the city that had been freed from the ice. The snow flurries in the forest, too, in the end, must have been the result of the magical weather.

“.....”

Even I myself did not understand how everything had ultimately returned to normal.

We left the country and proceeded through the forest on foot. We simply didn’t feel like riding on the broom, so we kept on walking all the way.

Eventually, around the time when the silhouette of the city completely faded from view, I turned around and looked at Amnesia.

“.....”

She had been wearing the same expression the whole time, ever since I was freed from the ice—silent and morose.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

She nodded slightly. “Yeah. I’m going to forget it soon, so—” She spoke despairingly, in a very, very shaky voice.

Her fingertips were trembling, her shoulders were quaking, even her mouth was quivering. As if she was shivering from some unbearable cold.

“All right”? Even though you seem so troubled?

It was too pitiful.

Thinking it might bring her some relief—though I didn’t know if this would have any effect on her—I embraced her.

“...Please don’t say something so sad.”

“.....”

The arms of the trembling girl grasped me immediately. She squeezed, harder and harder, as if making sure I was solid to the touch, gripping on to me as her arms encircled my back. I could barely breathe.

“...I’m...sorry. I’m sorry...! I’m sorry...!”

The girl buried her head in my shoulder. She was apologizing to me. She kept on saying sorry as she let out great sobs and soaked my robe with tears.

I rubbed her back. Despite her knightly appearance, it was the small, helpless back of a lonely little girl.

I stroked her hair. It was soft and warm, the hair of a living girl.

“Once you’ve finished crying, let’s continue our journey.”

I could feel her nod slightly.

I continued holding her, not letting go, for as long as it took for her to calm down.

“.....”

There was no way I could ask her...about what had happened.



CHAPTER 10

Amnesia's Forgotten Homecoming

A wispy cloud floating in the air seemed to follow the road creeping along the ground below. The path was surrounded by a meadow covered in wildflowers, and a cool breeze blew through them, sending the blossoms bobbing as we passed. In the distance, we could see a small river flowing at the same relaxed pace as us. The scene was permeated by the crisp lapping of water.

"...It feels so nice!"

I sensed a head plunking down onto my shoulder. Amnesia was nestling up against me, closing her eyes comfortably.

"Don't go to sleep, okay?" I responded, turning back to face ahead. "I think we'll be there soon."

Farther down the road stood a city surrounded by a wall. *The Holy City*. I somehow, in some way, understood this to be true.

HOLY CITY, ESTO AHEAD.

.....

By which I mean it was written right there. On a sign.

"Um, your hair is annoying me...," Amnesia murmured in my ear. My ashen hair and her white locks had become entwined, and some of my strands were brushing against the tip of her nose. With her eyes still shut, she screwed up her face at the itchy feeling, then finally sneezed. "Ah...achoo!"

"I hope you don't catch a cold."

"I don't think so...," she said, letting out a sigh as she spoke. "How long do you think before we arrive?"

"Not more than an hour, I think."

"Huh..."

"...Are you nervous?"

We would reach her hometown soon, after all.

“Hmm...I’m not sure. I don’t think we’re mistaken—the Holy City is my home—but I don’t really... I kind of just feel like we’ve made it, you know? I’m surprised that I’m so indifferent.” And then she said, “But I feel differently toward you, Elaina.”

“...? Toward me?”

She leaned her head on top of my shoulder. “I just met you this morning, but—but, how do I say this? It’s strange? I feel like I want this moment to continue forever.”

“.....”

“Even I don’t understand my own feelings. But some part of me hopes we’ll never reach the city—”

“That’s enough of that,” I interrupted her. “When your memory comes back, you’re going to be terribly embarrassed.”

“.....” After remaining silent for a moment, she chuckled. “You’re probably right.”

“...Yeah.”

—It’s not like I’m not drowning in my feelings about the end of our journey, you know.

My broom was floating here above the road as the breeze blew past us. It wasn’t simply to rock Amnesia to sleep, and neither was it to tantalize her with what lay ahead.

The two of us were probably harboring the same emotions.

Even so, the broom had to move forward.

We had to continue toward the Holy City down the same road.



The Holy City was a large city surrounded by a massive outer wall. The gate, however, was rather small, a forlorn little thing that looked like it could allow a single carriage to pass through at best. I thought it looked shabby. It was so small, I hadn’t even been able to see it from afar, and even now, I had a hard

time believing my eyes.

We stood in front of that gate.

“Pardon me!”

Amnesia rapped on the door—*knock, knock!*

A few moments passed before the wooden doors were opened unsteadily.

“.....”

The person who came out was obviously a mage. They wore a hood pulled far down over their head, but they didn’t say anything. They just stood there, stock-still.

“...Umm, my name is Amnesia. I’m from this country, and...” She looked up at the person nervously.

“.....”

Now that I thought about it, we really didn’t have any kind of proof that Amnesia came from this city. She didn’t even remember her own life. It was possible this was all a simple misunderstanding and that she really didn’t have any kind of connection to this place.

Apprehension descended on us along with the silence.

“Who is the witch with you?” The mage standing before us was looking at me. “Are you Amnesia’s traveling companion?”

Oh, so it seems the mage has a mouth.

After a momentary pause, I nodded. “Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“...Well then, you may enter. Please allow me to welcome you to our city.”

The mage stepped back from the gate, though it seemed that movement was directed at me and me alone. There wasn’t even an acknowledgment of Amnesia.

Something was strange about this.

“...Um.”

“Madam Witch. We would like to thank you. If you would be so kind as to go straight to the palace.”

“Thank me for what, exactly...? Is—?”

I was baffled and exchanged a glance with Amnesia, whose eyes were wide. She was clearly as confused as I was.

“We would like to thank you for bringing this criminal to us,” the mage said before pointing a wand at Amnesia.

It was a binding spell. Bluish-white strands of light stretched from the wand like snakes, encircling Amnesia.

“Huh...! Just a—What are you doing?! Hang on—”

Ignoring Amnesia’s bewildered protests, the magic user drew the blue-white restraints tight, completely binding her.

The mage yanked with the wand, forcing her to kneel. Amnesia looked up with frightened eyes as her captor glared at her.

“Fugitive Amnesia, I am placing you under arrest.”



We went to the palace, but apparently there was no monarch installed there. There was no monarchy in this country whatsoever.

Once I arrived, I was shown into a single room in the deepest recesses of the building. It was lined with fan-shaped tables and a podium and nothing else. In it were many adults wearing robes, so many that I couldn’t count them all.

Somehow or other, I understood this was a place where serious deliberations took place.

One person looked down at me indifferently from the podium. “Welcome to the Holy City. Your name is?”

“I am the Ashen Witch, Elaina. I am a witch,” I responded with detachment as well, looking up at them.

Low murmurs of admiration cropped up.

“You’re so young,” commented the person atop the podium, not seeming very interested. “When was it that you became a witch?”

As far as I could see, this aloof woman was the only other witch in the place.

“Three or four years ago,” I replied.

“...How old are you now?”

“I’m eighteen.”

“...So young.”

Looking less and less interested, she narrowed her eyes. Even if she wasn’t as young as me, she still looked quite young, though she could have been past her prime.

Though she was wearing a red dress, rather uncharacteristic of a mage, upon her breast was a star-shaped brooch like mine.

In this city, it seemed that dressing in a robe and pointy hat was not in fashion. There wasn’t a single person in the assembly wearing a similar hat to mine.

I suppose there’s no need to try to dress like a mage when every person in the city is one.

“We are grateful to you for bringing in that monster,” added the witch.

“.....”

“Are you curious about why she’s being treated as a criminal?”

“Was it obvious?”

She nodded. “All of the monster’s traveling companions have been similarly concerned. Just as you are now.”

“.....”

“But after they hear the situation, everyone scorns her. They come to loathe her from the bottom of their hearts. When they leave this country, they are glad to have forgotten everything about the place, particularly her. Just imagine having to carry the ghastly memories of a journey with a terrible criminal with you for the rest of your life. Wouldn’t that haunt you?”

“.....” I offered neither affirmation nor denial. “What on earth did she do?”

I just wanted to confirm the truth.

She must have expected such a reply, because the witch pressed her lips together and smiled ever so slightly.

“About that...I think it best that you do your own research. You’ll have an easier time processing everything that way, rather than trying to listen to us explain it here. You’ll see for yourself the evil deeds perpetrated by that woman.”

“So you’re saying you can’t be bothered to explain it to me?”

“No need to snap at me... That’s not the case. If we were to spell it out, you would doubt us. You’d wonder if she hadn’t been falsely accused of her crimes and whether we were framing her, you see. You *do* look like the type to do that,” the witch said.

“...How can you be so sure?”

“I just know.” The witch nodded. “At least, I know all of the criminal’s traveling companions who have made it this far. That’s why it’s better if you investigate on your own rather than hear it from us.”

I see.

“So—you’re saying that once I know about her crime, I’ll scorn her from the bottom of my heart? That I’ll loathe her, just like her previous companions?”

“Yes. I suppose you will. Especially since her crime is so serious that it can never be forgiven. I bet you’re thinking it can’t possibly be true.” The witch shrugged in resignation.

Then she said, “Well, we are deeply grateful to you for bringing that woman back here. Lest you forget: You are like a hero to our city for bringing that monster back. And so, as a sign of our gratitude, please allow us to prepare you a top-rate room and meal.”

I nodded slightly. “Thanks for that.” Not that I was happy about it.

After all—I would immediately forget everything the instant I left. Nothing would stick.

And if I came to scorn or loathe anything—or anyone—well, that would be forgotten just the same.

The city surrounded by the wall was spacious, but you would hardly know all the residents were mages just from looking at it.

The buildings nestled close to the road were tall and all painted pure white. When I asked, I learned the buildings were lit up yellow at night to give the city an air of mysticism...or something like that. The older man at the roadside stall where I had just bought bread was rather enthusiastic when it came to sharing details about his city.

Tangentially, he also said something like this—

“You’re the one who brought in that monster, Amnesia. Oh, thank you! I’ll give you this bread free of charge! It’s the least I can do to thank you for doing your part in her execution.”

Without accepting my money, he pressed the bread that I was going to buy into my hands. I wondered exactly when he had found out that I had been the one to bring Amnesia in.

“.....”

Put off by his gratitude, I lost my appetite.

After walking for a short while, I felt eyes on me from somewhere, as if I was being watched by someone or targeted by something. When I turned to look, a city in tumult stretched before me. People were coming up directly to thank me, or keeping their distance and telling their neighbors, “That person is the witch who brought in Amnesia,” or just giving me envious stares. It seemed like all eyes were on me.

“.....”

I couldn’t help but feel like I was somewhat conspicuous, and not in a good way.

I went through the town for a while before catching sight of a crystal shop. All sorts of rocks, large and small, were lined up in the window facing the street.

“Hello, everyone. Today, I have some good news.”

Remarkably, all the crystals were displaying the same scene. The witch who had greeted me earlier at the palace was on the other side of the display, gesturing grandly and wearing a joyful expression as she delivered some kind of address.

"I imagine you are all aware that a major criminal has at long last returned to this city."

"Um, what's this?"

The residents watching me from a distance moved almost too quickly, forming a circle around me.

"Oh, Miss Witch, are you curious about these stones?"

"We call these mirror crystals. That means they can display distant images and sounds, like a mirror!"

"Amazing, huh? This magical technology is our biggest pride and joy."

"Other places can't manage to pull off a trick like this!"

"Uh-huh...is that so...?" I asked.

"The citizens transfer some magical energy to the country every month to keep things running."

"Well, it's like we're paying out magical energy in place of taxes."

"We do that, and in return, we get incredible technology!"

"Isn't it amazing?"

"I wonder if countries in other places have stuff like this?"

"Obviously not, you dummy."

"Uh, that's enough." I spoke up.

"By the way, the witch speaking on the other side of the mirror crystals is the Rose Witch, Elimia."

"She's our one and only witch."

"Her powers are totally awesome!"

"The creation of the mirror crystals was also one of her great achievements!"

“No one knows her age. She’s been working in service of the city for a long time. Anyway, she’s an amazing witch and—”

“I said that’s enough. You’re so persistent.”

Even when I waved them away, the townsfolk continued blabbering.

What’s with them? Will they die if they stop talking? Stupid chatterboxes.

I was tempted to put them in their place, but the talkative townspeople were telling me many things I wanted to know.

“About the woman who you brought here—Amnesia.”

“She killed the witches in this city. All of them except for Lady Elimia.”

“Also, on top of that, she was the cause of a crisis in another country, bringing her poison with her.”

“She deserves to be executed! We need justice!”

“But anyway, about the wonderful Lady Elimia. She captured the fugitive and —”

On and on they went.

I had heard a lot that was difficult to believe, straight from the citizen’s mouths—but despite what they said, I simply could not imagine the Amnesia I knew doing that.

“We have determined the date and time of Amnesia’s execution,” announced the Rose Witch, Elimia, beaming down on us from the mirror crystals in the shop. *“Tomorrow morning, that woman will be beheaded in the plaza in front of the palace. All citizens are expected to attend, so do be sure to make an appearance.”*

The crowd around me broke into applause.

As if she knew I was there, Elimia added a final word from the other side. *“Of course, any noncitizens are also encouraged to attend.”* Then the projections went blank, the crystals becoming like ordinary mirrors.

Left only with my reflection, I stood there with a dazed expression.

Where was the best place to go to investigate something?

That's right. The library.

"...Let's go."

Once Elimia had finished speaking through the mirror crystals, I had asked the townspeople there about the location of the library and headed in that direction right away.

This institution seemed to have been built well. It was cavernous, with a large spiral staircase that turned round and round as it stretched toward the high ceiling, and rows of bookshelves that seemed to go on forever.

However, I was not here to visit those neatly ordered stacks.

"Please show me the newspaper archives. I need to see every single one of them."

I was here on an investigation. No further explanation was necessary.

I made my request to the librarian, who quickly released the back issues of the newspaper to me, going back about one year.

"Thanks," I said and offered a shallow bow, then sat down in a nearby chair.

"....."

I pored over every page, searching for anything related to my investigation—searching for anything that seemed like it might be even the slightest bit connected to whatever had taken Amnesia's memory.

It had all started a little more than a year ago.

One by one, four of the five witches in the city had gone missing. The only one left, the Rose Witch, Elimia, had proclaimed this was "treason against the Holy City!" and searched desperately for whoever was responsible. The Order of Holy Knights, which protected public safety, joined forces with Elimia, and together they hunted for the criminal who had killed the esteemed witches.

However, they didn't even find any clues, much less apprehend any suspects.

Why had they gone missing? Why hadn't their remains been found? Each discovery only raised more questions as the investigation continued, and

everything seemed to lead back to the palace.

It had appeared as though the curtain would fall, leaving the case unsolved. As things stood, it seemed the spirits of the four murdered witches would never know peace. Both the witch Elimia and the Holy Knights were growing impatient.

That's when it happened: The witch Elimia caught the culprit.

The criminal who killed the four witches was a member of the Holy Knights, a girl named Amnesia.

She was a blockhead who could barely use any magic, despite belonging to the Order of Holy Knights. She was a deadbeat. She couldn't even fly on a broom. The girl had an inferiority complex that drove her to acts of brutality, murdering witches and stealing their magical energy—allegedly.

Elimia had left this statement in the newspaper:

"In this city, we have a system whereby we pay out magical energy instead of taxes for the government to use, right? I am the one who formulated that system, but—one day, as part of my investigation, I was working alongside Amnesia when I saw her using quite a bit of magic. She told me she had been practicing, but all of you know it's difficult to improve your magic with just one or two days of training. When I looked into it, I realized she had made a system that imitated mine. Somehow it seemed she had stolen the witches' magical energy and killed them."

You could say Amnesia had always had difficulty in her relationships.

Without a strong handling of magic, she had been shunned by her own parents. She hadn't so much come of age as been tossed out of the house. She didn't have many people she could call friends and always operated alone.

She couldn't use magic, but her swordsmanship earned her some recognition, and she was admitted into the Order of Holy Knights. However, even among the Order, she was considered little more than a nuisance. To make matters worse, she was quickly outstripped by her younger sister who entered the Order after her and was assigned to work as her sister's underling.

She must have developed an inferiority complex.

The remains of the four witches had been discovered by Elimia, the Rose Witch. Their corpses had been cut to pieces, and the shape of the wounds was a match for Amnesia's sword.

That was not her only crime.

When Amnesia had developed her version of the system that Elimia had created to suck up magical energy, toxic by-product had been flushed into the underground sewer system. That pollution went on to devastate the environment in a neighboring land, and Amnesia was held responsible.

The murders of four witches. And the spread of magical pollution.

Amnesia's crimes were grave.

The High Council of Esto took the matter very seriously, and Amnesia was sentenced to a "forgotten homecoming."

It was a sentence given only to the worst criminals.

My research revealed the nature of the punishment—the convict was cursed to lose their memory every day and then be exiled from the city. But that was not the end.

What would the exiled individual do, driven into the outside world, unable to remember their own name? The people here knew perfectly well.

First, the convict would look for clues of their identity. Relying on the clothes they were wearing and whatever else was on their person, they would try to learn where they came from and where they should head.

Then, seeking their hometown, the convict would begin walking.

It might take one month. It might take two months. Perhaps it would even take a year. But they were sure to return. They would make their way back while repeatedly meeting and separating from other people and from their own selves, every day.

The curse would be lifted once the convict had returned to the city, just in time for their execution. They would regain their memories on the way up to the beheading block.

Just what kind of memories would the convict have of the time they spent

outside? There would probably have been many who treated the amnesiac with kindness. There weren't many disturbances to public order in this region, so citizens had warmly welcomed them into their homes. There must have been people worried over this criminal who was traveling with no memories.

Even if the reason for their memory loss was unclear, they would walk through the outside world with pining in their heart. In the end, those happy memories would only be made known to them on the route to the beheading block.

There, the convict would die, flooded with regret and despair.

Such was the sentence of a forgotten homecoming.

That is the sentence that would be carried out on Amnesia the following morning.

“.....”

When I had finished reading that far, I felt eyes on me once again.

I covertly peeked around the newspapers and the stacks of supplementary materials on the execution policies of the Holy City. This time, there was no one there, unlike in town.

There's no reason I should be feeling someone's gaze, but...

“...Hmm?”

Wait a minute. There's some kind of box.

There was a box sitting among the bookshelves, exactly the right size for a single person to squeeze inside.

“...What's that?”

It was too suspicious.

Come to think of it, I didn't recall there being anything like that in town. Even if it had been there in the middle of the road, it was nothing more than a simple box, and I wouldn't have been suspicious of it, but this was a library, you know? What business did it have here? To serve as a step stool?

“.....” I stood up, crouched down in front of it, and stared.

“.....Gh!” The box rattled and shook.

This isn't a step stool.

“Um, what are you doing?”

“.....”

“I'm talking to you. Can you hear me?”

Knock, knock. I rapped on the top of the box.

“.....” There was only silence. “Oh, don't mind me.”

Oh, so it can speak.

“What are you doing?”

“Don't mind me. This is, um...my hobby?”

Then why end with a question mark? Anyway—

“What kind of hobby requires you being in a box?”

“That would be...um...my hobby of tailing witches, and so on, I guess...?”

“Excuse me?” *You mean you're a stalker?*

I was shocked, and the girl in the box continued. “You are the Ashen Witch, Elaina. You're the person responsible for bringing the convict here.”

“...You know your stuff.” I imagined she'd learned about me on the mirror crystals.

“Only because I've been tailing you ever since you came to this city.”

“Are you a stalker?”

“No!” The box person sounded huffy. “I was trying to decide whether I could trust you.”

“Uh-huh.” I had already decided this box person was not the kind of person I could trust. “And? What do you think? Is my humble personage worthy of your confidence? Not that I care.”

I told her I had things to do and asked her to not bother me anymore. I stood back up.

“Wait, please!”

The person got to her feet, too. It looked like there was a pair of legs wearing a skirt protruding from the bottom of the box. A peculiar sight.

“Don’t you find the charges against Amnesia a little suspect? Isn’t that why you’re investigating them?”

Even though the girl’s face was hidden behind a box, her voice was desperate enough that I could easily tell how grim that face must be.

“.....” I had been about to return to my seat, but I paused and answered her. “What of it?”

“Would you like...to collaborate with me?”

“...Um, before we get to that, who are you?”

It was a simple, clear question.

How do you expect me to trust someone before seeing their face? Especially if this someone has just admitted to stalking me?

“Oh, s-sorry! I should have told you earlier!” stammered the girl, and she threw off the box, revealing long, soft, white hair. A ribbon was wrapped through it.

Judging by her youthful face, I guessed she was about one or two years younger than me.

Looking closely, she was clad in a white robe and dressed the same way as Amnesia.

Something about her face also brought to mind Amnesia. They would have been identical if she had chopped off her hair and if the ribbon in her hair had been a headband.

“You are—”

She nodded.

“My name is Avelia.”

As the box fell over with a hollow thud, she added, “Amnesia is my older sister.”





After that, I went to Avelia's house on her invitation.

For some reason, she kept wearing the box. Meaning I was following a walking box. I knew I was a part of this ridiculous scene as we tromped through town. According to Avelia, "All sorts of bad things would come of people finding out that you and I had met, Elaina," and she did not remove her disguise.

Don't you think worse things will come of you wearing a box on your head? You're attracting a lot of attention.

"It's fine. This way, the people will only recognize a moving box."

Really?

"Oh, if it isn't sweet Avelia."

"What are you doing today, wearing your box? Tailing somebody, I suppose?"

"You sure work hard!"

"Is that the Ashen Witch beside you?"

"I wonder what on earth happened?"

"....."

We've already been found out.

Does that mean you always wear the box? Are you stupid?

"Craaap!" She threw off the box in frustration as we went through town.

She answered the townspeople, saying, "I'm taking Elaina to my place to ask her the details about bringing in my convict sister! It's nothing to concern yourselves with!"

"....."

Seriously?

Before long, we arrived at her house. Apparently, the Holy Knights, or whatever they were, got paid a pretty penny. Her home was luxurious.

"Don't mind the mess."

In the spacious room, there were so many books and documents, articles and papers, plus all kinds of other things, that there was nowhere to stand. It was filled with all kinds of stuff, all of it related to her job. In a sense, it was a private room that didn't feel lived in. The sprawling room was a total mess.

After looking around, I stared at her. "Um, where should I sit?"

"Over there."

"....."

Over where...?

After an awkward moment, I stepped over the piles of paper scattered about and sat down on the floor, crisscross applesauce. There were both chairs and a table in the room, but they had long since become useless due to the mountains of documents piled on them.

"...All right then, let's have a chat," Avelia said, then plunked down in front of me. "...Elaina, how did you feel when you saw the state of this city?" She tilted her head inquisitively.

Hard to say...

"I feel like it's a strange place, to say the least. Rumors seem to spread at lightning speed, you've got odd inventions like those mirror crystals, and on top of that—"

On top of that, you've deemed Amnesia a criminal.

"Is she really a monster? I'm having a hard time imagining that."

I couldn't believe it. Even if the newspaper reports and the popular opinion doomed her to the sentence of a forgotten homecoming. Even if her own journey had been nothing but a march toward death. Even if her travels with me had been all for nothing.

It was still a mystery to me.

I couldn't believe that girl, the one who was happy-go-lucky despite losing her memory, who was never upset and remained mercilessly cheerful, could have been harboring a past in which she killed people and tried to steal their magical energy.

“To be honest, I lied back in town,” Avelia responded to me. “The truth is I wanted to know if you still believe in my sister, even after you brought her this far.”

“.....”

“Are you on her side?”

“.....” I stared into her jade-green eyes. “What about you?”

I was amazed she had the gall to interrogate me without revealing anything about herself. It was like she was still hiding in that box.

For a moment, she stared at me blankly, as if struck with surprise.

“Of course,” she said like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I’ve continued working at the palace as a Holy Knight, moving behind the scenes to someday help her.”

“But in the public eye, you treat your sister as a criminal.”

“Ah, but if I didn’t, I wouldn’t be able to gain the trust of the people.”

Fair point.

“...So was your sister falsely accused?”

Avelia nodded meekly. “There’s no doubt. Everything was arranged by that witch.”

“...That witch.” I was about to ask which one, but it occurred to me there was only one left in this country. “The Rose Witch?”

“Yup.”

“...So you’re saying Elimia set up Amnesia. That she’s responsible for her exile?”

“Yup, yup.”

“...And that Amnesia is going to die because of Elimia.”

“Yup, yup, yup.”

“.....” *All that yup-ing is getting annoying.*

“I know it was sudden and you probably can’t trust me, but that’s the truth.”

“...Well, it’s not really that I can’t believe you.”

I’m strangely satisfied with that explanation. I guess this was what I was expecting.

I mean, you could tell that witch was suspicious just by looking at her. And what was with her lazy drawl? She’s definitely shady, all right.

“But in that case, what on earth is the truth? Why was Amnesia set up?” I asked.

Avelia answered, “It’s a bit of a long story.”

“Make it brief, please.”

“Humph.” Avelia puffed out her cheeks, making it clear I had hurt her feelings. “It’s impossible to shorten my big sister’s story.” She began to spin a tale.

...But by the way—

“You really love your big sister.”

As expected, Avelia answered me in a tone that suggested it was only too natural.

“Obviously.”

After I heard everything there was to know about Amnesia from the mouth of her younger sister Avelia, I left the room for a moment and hunkered down, cradling my broom.

“.....”

It had been an unfortunate tale that made my chest feel tight.

It was the story of a girl who had not been particularly blessed in life.

What did she do to deserve this? Why did they have to treat her this way, just because she had been one of the rare few in this country without the ability to use magic?

Even though she’s such a nice person—

“What do you think?” I asked the broom in my arms.

She wasn’t in human form right now. She was standing there idly, just a

normal broom, but she answered me in my mind with an indifferent attitude.

“What do I think? ...Why are you asking me that? Is it to know if you ought to collaborate with Mistress Avelia? Or are you trying to determine whether her story is credible?”

“Both.”

“In other words, you don’t intend to cooperate with Mistress Avelia until you have ascertained the truth.”

“Yeah.”

“In that case, I don’t feel the need to answer.”

Biting words.

“...Someone is in a bad mood today.”

“I’m fed up with acting like a good little broom when you only summon me in crisis.”

“.....”

“Just kidding.”

If she had been in her human form, I imagined she would have been smiling.

“As far as I’m concerned, I think the story that Mistress Avelia told you is the truth. That’s what I believe.”

“Hmm.”

“Do you know how I know?”

“.....”

Even though we’d taken the same journey, my broom was apparently holding on to some information I didn’t have that gave her some insight into Avelia’s story. It was clear something had happened when I was not around.

Like, for example, an incident in the city that was covered in ice, or something.

“...Please tell me. What happened while I was frozen?”

After we had left that place—once I had seen Amnesia despondent, seen her

panic and fear and bewilderment—I had never been able to bring myself to speak of it.

I had hesitated because I had thought I would find myself crying if I knew the cruel truth.

“Of course.” I thought I could feel her smile. *“But before that, can I ask you one thing?”*

“...What?”

“Mistress Elaina, weren’t you always leaning toward rescuing Mistress Amnesia? Even before you asked for my help with the incident in that other city? Even before this sequence of events?”

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

I shrugged as if she was talking nonsense.

My broom ignored my attitude. In fact, I wasn’t sure whether she could even see me in her current state. “You summoned me in my broom form precisely because you’ve already decided to cooperate with Mistress Avelia. Because this way, you can conserve your magic.”

No way. Listen to yourself.

“I left you in that form because it would shock the people around us if a broom were to suddenly change into a human.”

“I think you startled the people as soon as you began speaking to a broom.”

“.....”

“And there’s no one around us.”

“.....” I let out a sigh. “You’re in a mood today.”

My broom answered yes in a tone that suggested it was obvious. “Because I am my lady’s humble possession.”

I had known the answer all along.

I promised to cooperate fully with Avelia’s plan.

From the very beginning, there had been no need to deliberate or verify the

facts.

It was only obvious that I would help her.



“My big sister’s execution is scheduled for ten in the morning tomorrow. As for the place, it’s going to be in the plaza in front of the palace, according to Elimia’s announcement in the mirror crystals.”

When I had come back inside and told her I would collaborate with her, Avelia had embraced me.

“Ah! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! With your help, I just know we can save her!”

Then she had regained her composure and pulled away. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m just devoted to my sister.” After that, she had shared her strategy with me.

What’s with the extreme mood swings?

“The plan can only be tried once. First, I’ll wait in the plaza for the exact moment when my sister’s memory returns. Elaina, you’ll sneak into the palace and deal with Elimia.”

“What makes you so sure that Elimia will be inside the palace?”

“She’s the one arranging for my sister to be beheaded. I imagine she’ll be deep inside the edifice until it happens—uh, in the council hall that you went to yesterday. She should be waiting in that room. I think.”

Uh-huh. “So, your plan is to stall for time before the execution? Then what? How on earth are you planning to save your sister?”

Seems like a slapdash plan.

“When Elimia doesn’t make it for the appointed execution time, I will be entrusted with the duty of cutting off my sister’s head.”

“...Why is that?”

“Because the duty of the beheading is passed down through those people who shared a deep bond with the convict before losing their memories.”

Elimia had publicly played a very active part in capturing Amnesia.

Avelia had publicly been on bad terms with her sister.

Okay. So their bonds are deep.

“Her memory will return to normal as she ascends to the beheading block. That means that’s our best chance. If we rescue her from the execution right at that moment, we can escape with her memories intact.”

“And after that?”

“We leave the country. I’ll give you a signal after I rescue my sister, and then you can forget about Elimia, and after that, just go with the flow.”

“...And then?”

“Huh? That was the outline of the plan.”

“But if we follow it to a T, there’s about a million ways for it to end in disaster.”

Um, hello? Everyone in this city is a mage. Even if we were able to run away, everyone who leaves the city has their memories of Esto erased. Did you forget about the fact that nobody outside knows what it’s really like in the Holy City?

“Fine. Then what do you suggest?”

“Uh, there’s no need to sulk.”

Avelia had her cheeks puffed out. They looked like they would pop if I stuck them with my finger.

“I worked so hard to come up with that plan...”

“...I have a feeling that your Order of Holy Knights is going to see right through that.”

Since she had been boasting about her job in the palace, I had assumed she had come up with a strategy that employed her knowledge of the building, her professional contacts, her personal relationships, and even the local magical techniques.

But it seemed she was trying to get things done with raw force.

“...In that case, what should we do? Elaina?” Avelia had her eyes narrowed at me.

“What should we do?” I parroted. “If we can take down Elimia, that would be the end of it.”



These are my memories—all my fleeting memories.

“Big Sis, look! This box! If I use this, I can go undercover!”

My younger sister Avelia held aloft an odd-sized box, just about big enough for one person to squeeze inside. She beamed proudly. That was exactly the same day that she had been accepted into the Order of Holy Knights, I think.

She had suddenly come to my house, doing something truly bizarre...

“We don’t really do any undercover work in the Holy Knights.”

“Really?”

“We mainly do odd jobs around the palace. And there aren’t that many criminals in this city.”

The duties of the Order of Holy Knights are very, very plain, and basically confined to the palace. They included the management of the mirror crystals, preparation of materials for assembly meetings, and the cleaning and maintenance of the palace. Aside from that, they involved escorting important people and guarding the palace, et cetera. If there was ever an incident or accident, we were sent out to investigate, but there weren’t any flashy battles or anything.

It was ordinary. Totally normal.

“Then...what should I do...with...this box...?”

“Well, you won’t have a chance to use it.”

“But look, if I use it all the time, it might be useful to launch surprise attacks! Someone might be all like, ‘Hmm? What’s with that box?’ and then I’ll emerge from inside. Or they might think *Avelia of the Holy Knights is over there by the box*, while I creep up from behind. Or something.”

“But there’s no occasion to use it in the first place...”

“...Hmm...”

She was looking at me like she needed me to find a use for this box. I wished she wouldn't.

"Oh, by the way, Big Sis. I left home."

"Huh?" *What is this girl talking about?*

"You left home when you joined the Holy Knights, right? So I thought I would go off on my own, too."

"....."

I had left because I didn't like being treated like a burden, but Avelia had always been adored by our parents, so I didn't think there was any need for her to do such a thing.

"I don't remember getting myself a box when I moved out of the house." I chuckled.

Avelia pouted.

Thinking about it now, it's just a silly memory.

Avelia became my superior about one year later.

"Starting tomorrow, she's going to be your boss. Obey her well."

That had been my instruction, and they brought in my younger sister. I could hardly use magic at all, and any kind of promotion was a distant, empty dream.

Instead of magic, I had honed my skills with the sword, but a member of the modern Order of Holy Knights rarely had any need for those kinds of talents, so I was still considered little better than a loser.

Now it was like I had been slapped in the face by the Order.

"Big Sis—" Avelia was looking at me with concern in her eyes.

"...It's fine. Don't worry about it."

Somehow, I answered her, and stroked her hair.

The truth was that my stomach was churning, and I wanted to scream. Until this point, I had blamed myself and my lack of magical ability for my poor treatment. However, it was unforgivable that the Holy Knights were using my

little sister to harass me.

From that day, my relationship with my sister grew distant.

Avelia was always in a daze, often making careless mistakes, but she was also a genius at magic, and she shot through the ranks of the Holy Knights.

As she was flourishing on center stage, my existence in the background was losing value by the day.

After about a year had passed since my younger sister joined the Order of Holy Knights, we no longer even made eye contact.

No one had forced this on us. It wasn't even something we'd really decided on. It was simply too painful for either of us to look at the other's face. I think it must have been bad for her morale to see me clinging to my position among the Holy Knights.

However, I knew that if I were to hang up the uniform, I would have nothing left, so I kept my post, day after day. Even when I suffered, I pretended nothing was wrong and kept up appearances with a smile.

Then one day, it happened.

"...Huh?"

I had been tasked with processing letters sent from outside the city as part of my routine duties. That said, since I didn't have a bit of interest in the world outside this country, basically I had been ordered to "Open the envelopes and sort the contents into the keep pile and trash pile," and that's just what I was doing, nothing more.

Well, to make a long story short, I found something strange mixed in with that bundle of letters.

"Damage Report on the Pollution Coming from the Holy City...? What is this?"

It was a letter from someone named the Great Witch Rudela, or something along those lines, living in a nearby city.

In summary, it was a direct appeal to our government, stating that "Toxic pollution is coming from your city. It's destroying our environment and causing chaos in our city. This is an urgent matter! Please take immediate action!"

Toxic pollution—that phrase had drawn my eye.

The Holy City was extremely isolationist and went to great lengths to avoid disputes with any outsiders. If the city was the source of this issue, that would be a very serious problem. It was the kind of thing that the city should have been on guard against.

Of course, investigations of this sort would have been entrusted to the Holy Knights.

In any case, the spread of toxic pollution was a matter that could not go overlooked. And so I reported it immediately to my direct supervisor.

“...I’m sorry, Big Sis. I’ve got no time for that right now.”

My boss—by which I mean my little sister—said she had her hands full with another matter. In short, she *obviously* couldn’t spare the time to look into something so trivial.

You’re joking.

I didn’t know where my sister’s true feelings lay. In her heart, I was sure she wanted to help me. But when I had shown my sister the letter, there were other subordinates around her, and they shouted abuse at me.

“Avelia is busy investigating a murder right now.”

“She’s not just a wage thief like you, sorting letters!”

“Yeah, you layabout.”

“Could you not add needless work to her day?”

They were trying to get a reaction out of me. I didn’t know how she really felt.

“...All right, I understand. I’m going back to letter sorting,” I said as I took the report back from Avelia, ignoring her underlings.

I had lied.

If no one was going to do anything, I intended to do something myself. I would just investigate on my own terms.

“...I’m sorry.”

Ignoring Avelia as she whispered an apology with her head hung low, I walked out.

To be honest, the investigation was surprisingly simple. Once I put my mind to it, it was so easy that I finished it in one day, working alone, with time to spare.

The Great Witch Rudela, whoever she was, seemed to have made up her mind that if the people of this city didn't realize they were the cause of the pollution, they must be a bunch of idiots. She had conveniently enclosed with her letter some mysterious strips of paper that would change color only in the presence of a toxic substance.

"All right. Basically, I'll go search the sewers, then follow the trail to the source."

With that, I snuck beneath the Holy City.

It was gloomy, so dark that I wouldn't have been able to see an inch in front of my face without my lantern. The walls and ceiling were made of crimson brick. Beside the narrow walkway, the city's waste flowed by in a sluggish stream. Perhaps because I had only my dim light, or perhaps because it reflected the dark red of the brick, the color of the water was very murky, and it looked exactly like blood.

"...Nnh."

I wanted to get out of there quickly, so I immediately stuck a strip of paper into the flowing water and looked at the color.

"Oh, it turned blue!"

Only the wet part of the white paper had changed colors. According to Rudela, "If it turns blue, that place is flush with the toxin, so please take note." That must have been the case here.

After that, I kept checking the color as I worked my way upstream through the sewer. All the strips turned blue. It was enough to make me think all the water coming out of this city must be polluted.

But the truth was different.

"...Huh?"

It was about an hour after I had begun my investigation.

The color of the paper that I stuck into the water did not change. I just had a soggy, wilted strip of paper in my hand.

“.....”

I raised my head, and when I turned to look behind me, I saw that there was a single door near me.

In the sewer. In a place where people shouldn't be coming and going. In a place for sewage.

What's this? Confused, I stuck a piece of paper into the water flowing right below the door.

It turned blue.

But if I went upstream, the color didn't change.

“...Seriously?”

It seemed there could be no doubt that the toxic substance was flowing out of whatever was behind this incredibly suspicious door.

I eyed the sketchy door.

I was quite torn as to whether or not I should enter. But nothing would get done if I kept standing there.

After some hesitation, I eventually opened the door.

And a world even gloomier than the sewer, a black abyss, opened its maw.

“.....What...is this...?”

I had found corpses. So many dead bodies.

They were surrounded by what looked like lab equipment, strange chemicals, and glass jars containing internal organs that I supposed had been taken out of the cadavers.

IMMORTALITY. ETERNAL YOUTH. EVERLASTING MAGIC.

Among the jars were scattered stacks of paper with words like something out of a fever dream.

A moment later, I noticed the stench of decomposition enshrouded the whole room. I also realized the dead bodies belonged to witches who I recognized.

I had encountered a problem I could not possibly handle on my own.

“Oh no—you’re trespassing.” A sluggish voice echoed from behind me—from *right* behind me.

“Wha—?” I squeaked as I tried to turn around.

“I know. Since you’re down here, I may as well use you as a scapegoat for my crimes—”

I knew that voice.

It belonged to the Rose Witch, Elimia—

—and then I lost consciousness.



The very next day, the rumor that my big sister had killed four witches and stolen their magic spread like wildfire.

The outline of the incident followed the materials Elaina had read in the library. However, I couldn’t help but find it mysterious.

Did they really think she could pull off such a thing?

As far as I knew, my older sister had a mean sword hand, but she was too nice to kill a bug. She only used her blade to scare off any would-be troublemakers.

And not to come across as rude, but could she even kill those witches when she only had her sword to fall back on?

I thought it unlikely.

However, she was tried and judged at the palace, sentenced to a forgotten homecoming.

Of course, she maintained her innocence through the trial. My older sister, who seldom cried in front of other people, had broken down in tears, glaring at Elimia as if to imply, “*It wasn’t me! You’re the one who killed them!*”

However, the witch produced one piece of damning evidence after another and silenced any argument.

The judges and magistrates at the trial readily accepted Elimia's proof and swiftly handed down the sentence of a forgotten homecoming.

Even now, I think it was a total farce.

Everyone in the room had already decided that my sister's words were empty delusions and didn't even bother to listen to her testimony. Everyone except me.

Somewhere in my heart, I believed her words were the truth.

I was certain it had all been arranged by Elimia.

I didn't care about the proof.

My older sister had gone to investigate the sewers alone after I had refused to listen to her. And there, she had seen something she wasn't supposed to see. That was why she was being passed off as a murderer. That must have been it.

That was why I needed to save my sister.

My chance was coming—when she ascended to the chopping block and her memory returned. That would be the only opportunity.

After I told her the truth, Elaina said, "Um, I'm going to go get some air," and left the house. I could hear her talking unintelligibly with someone. When I stole a glance outside, I caught her carrying on a conversation with her broom.

Who is she? A manic pixie dream girl?

Wait, hold on. The broom is talking back to Elaina. But it's got her voice... Is it ventriloquism? Manic pixie dream girl, confirmed.

After coming back inside and telling me that she would cooperate, Elaina had dismissed my plan flatly. "Um... What? We would never rescue your sister like this. Are you an idiot or a fool or just plain incompetent?"

Damn it!

On top of that, she surprised me by acting with composure. "If we can take down Elimia, that would be the end of it."

Don't be absurd, please.

I shook my head. "She's a powerful witch. Plus, she's been an important

figure in this city. It's been that way for a long, long time. There's no way you can win."

Honestly, the real trouble with the Rose Witch, Elimia, didn't have anything to do with her abilities. It was that she was always protected by a loyal cadre of Holy Knights.

Confronting her directly would mean facing all of them as well.

"That's why I've made my sister's rescue the only priority."

"We need to strip Elimia of her power," Elaina said. "Otherwise, even if we were to save Amnesia, there'd be no guarantee we'd make it out of the city."

Elaina was strangely confident.

And then she put up her index finger. "There's only one missing puzzle piece to carry out this plan. I need you to tell me just one thing. Once we've got that, the rest will follow."

I told her what she wanted to know, and then we spent a long time working and reworking the rescue plan. After that, we fell asleep. It was the first good night's rest I'd gotten in a long, long while.

I wondered if it was because we would be able to save my big sister.

"I think it's because I've cleaned your room for you."

"....."



"At last the time has come!"

A mirror crystal displayed the cheerful crowd gleefully gathering to witness Amnesia's execution. They were showering her with all kinds of abuse, and their jeers sounded just like hoots of joy as she crossed the plaza toward the beheading block one step at a time, dazed and confused.

When she reached the stairs and began her ascent, her memory would return.

"It's about time, I suppose." Elimia, who had been gazing at the mirror crystal alone in the conference room, stood up slowly as if her hips were lead and picked up her wand.

She started walking but didn't make it very far.

"Where might you be going?"

She was quite surprised when I suddenly appeared from a corner of the room, but she managed to keep her cool. "Just how long have you been there?"

"Since you sat down, looking bored."

"...I've been sitting the whole time."

"I'm saying I've been here from the beginning."

Though I don't suppose you recognized me, since I transformed into a mouse.

"You shouldn't make a habit out of ambushing people."

"Says the one framing an innocent girl."

"I suppose you're talking about Amnesia." Staring at the mirror crystal, Elimia tilted her head, looking bored. "Are you implying that she hasn't killed anyone?"

"She's not the type of person to do such a thing."

"I wonder how you can be so sure, seeing as you've only known Amnesia without her memory."

The Amnesia I knew was someone who prioritized the well-being of others before her own, even though she didn't know who she was. She was like a sheltered child, weak, and well aware of her own shortcomings, but she worked hard to never show that to anyone. She was cheerful with a tendency to bear painful things all by herself. She was perhaps a little happy-go-lucky, and, to put it unkindly, kind of a dummy, but made the choice not to cause harm to anyone, even in hopeless situations. She was an incredible person.

To imagine she was secretly building a strange device to absorb the magical energy of four murdered witches, all for her own selfish reasons... Well, it was unthinkable. Obviously.

"...You're the one responsible for Amnesia's scheduled beheading today in the plaza."

She nodded. "Yes. I am the last remaining witch, so it's only proper. I must

clear all grudges for the sake of my fallen brethren.”

I was standing in the way, blocking her path as she spoke in her usual drawl.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that,” I said. “I must humbly stand in your way.”

And then I took out my wand.

Elimia stared at me for a moment, like she wasn’t quite sure what I was doing. After a pause, her eyes opened wide, and she snorted at me. “I suspected you would support Amnesia through thick and thin.” She thrust her wand out and walked forward—as if she wasn’t paying the slightest bit of attention to the fact that I was standing in her way. “You’ve been very worried about that girl ever since you arrived. Who on earth put that idea into your head? That I somehow framed Amnesia for her crimes? Could it have been the convict herself?”

“I’m under no obligation to answer you.”

I suppose if I tell you, you’ll try to kill that person after you’re finished with me.

“...Well, I don’t really care.” Elimia came to a halt in front of me, looking down at me with a pair of cold, emotionless eyes.

“I don’t have the time to play. Right now, I’ve got an errand that I mustn’t fail to complete. Would you be so kind as to move aside?”

“Why don’t you try and make me?”

“.....”

“Of course, I’m not going to step aside that easily. I’m a witch, just like you. Worst case, I’m prepared to fight to a draw. Though I think it’s likely that I will win.”

“.....” She sighed once, as if in utter amazement. “That’s too bad. You became a witch so young that I thought you must be something special—but it seems you’re a hopeless idiot.”

“Is that how you see me?”

“I mean, you’re supporting a criminal, aren’t you?” Elimia, who was still clinging to the illusion that Amnesia was a felon and that she was delivering justice, snapped her fingers. “...But allow me to amend the terms of our

engagement.”

Mages popped out from all around the room, dressed in the uniform of the Order of the Holy Knights.

They must have been hiding the whole time—since when?

“Since yesterday, when I first met you in this room, I thought you definitely had your fangs out for me. After all, you seemed to have a lot of faith in Amnesia.”

Is that what it looked like? But I was trying to wear the most sober face possible.

“And you ambushed me.” She smiled, looking deeply happy for the first time. “I thought for certain you would come for me—after all, I’m a witch, too, so you guessed you could win against me one on one. But what will you do in this situation?”

White uniforms as far as the eye could see.

The mages wore their cowls pulled down low over their heads so that even their genders were a mystery. They had me surrounded, wands at the ready.

The pressure was overbearing, as if even a single misstep would be enough to disturb the hornet’s nest.

Ah, I see—so that’s why she chattered on for so long. That’s why she kept her true motives concealed and continued this charade against Amnesia.

I got it.

“—Well?” I tapped the floor with my wand.

Immediately, ice spread out from that point until everything in the room was encased in it. Just like a certain city. As far as I could see, everything was painted over white and blue—even the mages, in their white uniforms, were covered over by a second layer of white frost.

Everything except for me and Elimia.

Aside from us, everything was pure white.

She had her mouth slack open, dumbfounded, and I responded with a sigh. As

my cloudy white breath danced lightly through the air like smoke, I simply continued glaring at the witch before my eyes.

“It’s been one against one *since the very beginning*. Can’t you see our surroundings?”

Could it be that your vision is weak because you’re old enough to have to dress to look young?

I suggest reading glasses.



In that moment, I remembered everything.

What I had seen in the sewers. How I had been framed by Elimia. How no one had listened to my side of the story. How no one had stepped in to save me. How I had been expelled from the country. How I had kept losing my memory every day after that.

I remembered days of wandering, not knowing who I was. Days spent unable to sleep, fearing the coming of the morning sun. I remembered sleeping anyway, then walking around searching for clues of my identity and scribbling in my notebook.

I remembered meeting Elaina.

I remembered bringing her here; telling her of my hope that I would understand everything if I could just reach my hometown.

“Ah...ahhh...ah...!”

Everything, everything, everything. Everything. Everything—I remembered it all.

I am Amnesia, a member of the Holy Knights, who has a younger sister, and I... and I...I—

I remembered all of it.

I stood there in a daze, bound hand and foot, looking at a huge guillotine.

I wasn’t sure whether my splitting headache was from the sudden riot of chaotic memories or the cheers of the crowd that packed the space.

I couldn't tell.

"All right, Amnesia got her memories back! Off with her head!"

It looked just like a festival.

There was a government official standing next to me, running the event. This was the first time I had seen one of them wearing such a happy expression.

"W-wait—"

Wait!

I started to say something, but the jumble of words from the crowd cut me off.

"Oh no—I really wanted Lady Elimia to come, but...it sounds like she's sleeping in today. Shall we call up the substitute?"

Substitute? Who? I looked around as if this was somebody else's problem.

Immediately after it was suggested, one name was repeated throughout the crowd.

Avelia.

My younger sister.

"Avelia! Where is Avelia?" shouted the official, who was acting as MC. "She should be the one to execute the convict!"

However, she did not appear.

It was almost like she was keeping them in suspense.

Before too long, the crowd split. The throng parted, revealing a single, small box, just about the right size for one person to get inside.

Everyone knew what it really contained.

"Oh, Avelia! That's where you were!"

From the day she had entered the Order of Holy Knights, Avelia had carried that stupid box around with her. She was always spouting some dumb nonsense like: "As long as I have this box, no one will find out my true identity."

The government official descended from the guillotine, rushing over to the

box with a little jog. “You don’t have to make such an elaborate production of it.”

He had a pleasant demeanor. It was difficult to imagine that someone so cheerful was about to lead an execution. “Come, it’s time to put an end to this criminal.”

And then the official lifted the box.

“—?”

There was no one inside.

Never mind my sister, there wasn’t anyone in there at all.

The box was empty.

“—Hiyaaaaah!”

It happened as they were checking on her.

First, her disembodied voice filled the air; then a second too late, they realized she had burst out from a different spot altogether.

By that point, I was already up in the air.

“Ah, hang on—huh? What’s happening—?”

“Big Sis, you stay quiet and hang on tight! You’ll fall if you don’t!” she warned.

She faced the front, while I looked down at the city. She activated her wand as she continued steering the broom, untying the ropes that bound my hands and feet. Free from its knots, the rope tumbled away, looking as if it was being sucked up by the city.

“Avelia—”

I clung to the broom.

“Even though no one in the country believed you, Big Sis, I believed you. I’ve been waiting and waiting for this moment.”

That was when she turned to look at me.

“So I guess I found a use for that box.”

Avelia grinned impishly.



Swords, spears, and all sorts of other weapons were scattered about the room now covered in ice. They were just scattered on the floor, not stuck into anything.

Even though the knights had launched them with power, even though there were so many of them, they had all fallen, the same as their weapons.

I had conjured up magical ice that did not melt—something I had seen another time in another city. However— “...You don’t seem concerned for the lives of your friends.”

I looked at Elimia, who wore a cool expression in the corner of the room.

“Suppose not,” she said and let a smile slip. “I was planning to pin the blame for everything on you once our fight was over. Then it wouldn’t matter if you were reckless—though it looks as though there was no need to worry about that.”

“.....”

“More importantly, where did you learn that I framed Amnesia? Would you be kind enough to tell me, for my own edification?” Elimia said, blasting hellfire from her wand.

“That’s a secret.” I froze the thick jet of raging flame in time and conjured up a wall made out of more unmelting ice.

“How about I try to guess?”

Something on the margins of my vision moved. With a clatter, innumerable spears came whizzing toward me. I barely noticed them before they could skewer me.

“If you think you can, go ahead.”

I knocked the spears out of the air.

Elimia cast another spell in my direction as I ducked out from behind the ice wall I had conjured, as if she had known where I would be going.

“...Tch!”

Extra gravity. I was certain that was what she had hit me with. Pain spread

through me like a great weight had been dropped on top of me.

“Ah—I finally caught you, eh?” she mumbled, sounding very bored, and slowly walked toward me. *Tak, tak, tak*—her heels struck the ice.

“Avelia was the one who told you about my plan. Amnesia’s younger sister.”

“.....”

Bull’s-eye.

I was not about to confirm it, so I stayed silent.

“That little sister of hers always seemed to be sneaking around in the background—it’s no wonder she would make a move now, when Amnesia is about to be executed.”

“.....” I kneeled, fighting against the crushing weight, and managed to choke out a few words. “...If you knew so much...why did you...leave her alone?”

“Because I don’t have the time to spare to go out of my way to monitor every insect that crosses my path.”

And because you’re not the type to get worked up over an opponent who’s the very picture of ignorant bliss, the type of girl who wears a box over her head regardless of the situation.

You do have a point. However much I hate to admit it.

“On top of that, the idiot residents trust me from the bottoms of their stupid little hearts. At this point, she can’t change the future. Amnesia’s trial is finished, and I will continue my research into eternal youth.”

Elimia had gotten strangely talkative all of a sudden. She was obviously getting carried away by the sound of her own voice.

I suppose she’s convinced of her victory. I guess she thinks she’s beaten me.

...That said, I’m unable to move a muscle because of this weight.

She crouched beside me and stroked my cheek. “You have lovely skin. I’m jealous... What’s your skin care routine?”

“.....”

“Oh, don’t scowl. How scary!”

“...Why did you frame Amnesia?”

The hand touching my face stopped in place.

“If it got out that I killed four witches in pursuit of eternal youth, the people’s faith in me would take a nosedive. Is that too hard to understand?”

“.....”

“Don’t you know? The blood of witches is supposedly a source of everlasting youth. That’s why I killed them,” she told me in a calm demeanor.

“...You killed four people just for that?”

“I don’t expect a child like you to understand. Youth is the asset that is the most difficult to replace. You don’t understand how awful it is to watch your brilliance fade with each passing day.”

“...Maybe, but I don’t think I would ever be willing to commit murder just to stay young.”

“You’ll change your tune in a few years.”

I think I might have angered her.

Her tone of voice had changed completely. It had grown sharp and cold. I could feel the enhanced gravity pressing down on me even harder.

“And you see that you can’t keep blabbing on forever.”

I was certain she would read my answer as a bluff.

“How long do you intend to keep up that charade?” she asked, looking triumphant.

Suddenly, the doors to the conference room burst open, and an uncountable number of Holy Knights rushed in. They trampled in noisily over the ice, every one of them holding a wand.

“.....” Elimia was relatively composed, faced with these sudden intruders.

Her demeanor changed completely. “My. What’s the matter? I suppose you came to assist me? But everything is all right. I’ve captured the fool who sided

with Amnesia.”

The soldiers did not reply.

They spread out to surround her.

Not me—they circled around Elimia.

“...What on earth are you all doing?”

The wands of the soldiers were all facing her.

“...How do you explain what you said earlier?” someone asked. “Do you understand what you have done?”

“...?”

She didn’t seem to get it, based on her expression.

“We’re taking you into custody on four counts of murder.”

Then a bluish-white light streamed from the wands of the Holy Knights.

“Wha—?”

It only took them a moment to restrain her. Her arms and legs were completely bound by chains of light from every direction, and her wand clattered to the floor.

“Haah...”

At last, I, too, regained my freedom.

My shoulders felt incredibly stiff. I stood up. When I tried moving my arms, pain shot through my body.

“You... What...what on earth did you—”

Elimia’s voice shriveled as if she was being pressed down on by an extra gravity spell. She looked up at me.

Oh, how the tables had turned.

“I just got her to teach me.”

I revealed how it had all been done by tapping my wand on the floor.

In an instant, the ice that covered the room faded away to nothing, freeing

Elimia's underlings who had been frozen in time. They looked around them. I could almost see the question marks hanging over their heads. Elimia's fire spell started moving in time again, so I summoned some water to quench it.

I had only frozen this room. This room, and almost everyone inside it.

Neither I nor Elimia had been frozen.

Nor had the mirror crystal.

—I just got Avelia to teach me how to use the mirror crystals.

"Good work on that confession."

As I planted a hand down on her shoulder, I flashed her a cheeky grin.



Elimia had come right out and divulged the whole story straight from her own chattering mouth without having the slightest clue that the mirror crystal in the room was still active. Needless to say, she was judged by her fellow citizens.

As to what sort of sentence they had in store for her—well, it was not for me to know what would happen. I am a traveler, after all, and it is not in my nature to stay long in a single country.

Amnesia was cleared of all charges and set free.

However, the wounds she had endured from being entrapped by her hometown and set up by Elimia would not be so easily mended.

Even if she received an official apology from the city, all that would remain the same.

The Holy City did not know what to do with Amnesia once she had been suddenly transformed from a major criminal to a target of pity.

The citizens did not detest her, but neither did they feel any real sympathy for her. They simply watched her carefully from a distance. Several days passed that way.

Eventually, the government of Esto promised to grant her whatever she wished. They had even admitted it was the least they could do.

"...Anything, huh? Hmm..."

In front of the important people who had gathered in the conference room, she hemmed and hawed, tapping her fingers on her cheek as she thought.

“Our country could support you so you can live your whole life without wanting for anything. We could make it so you never receive discriminatory treatment again. We will grant your wishes no matter what,” said a representative from the city council.

Eventually, she nodded. “Okay. In that case, could I make just one request?”

And then she smiled.

It was as beautiful as a blooming flower.

The following day, she left the Holy City, Esto. She had no further business in the city, and anyway, isolationism wasn’t a terribly interesting way to live.

The green fields greeted us, looking just as they had several days earlier.

—Us.

“...Are you sure you’re happy with your request?” I looked at Amnesia, standing next to me.

She nodded enthusiastically. “I mean, this is good, right?”

She’d had only one request.

That Amnesia and I and her younger sister Avelia could leave the Holy City with our memories intact.

That was it.

“Well, I got something out of it, too, but...”

Since I had kept my memory, I still knew a little bit about life in the Holy City.

I should be able to do good business... I think making and selling those mirror crystals could be lucrative.

In the end, Amnesia had decided to leave her hometown.

I suppose it was because she found all her memories of the time when she was wandering as a traveler to be happy ones. On top of that, it might have been because all her memories of the Holy City were painful and sad.

“...You know, I don’t particularly hate this city,” she admitted, squinting up at the huge wall like she was being blinded by the glare. “I’m sure if I was able to use magic, and there had been someone who couldn’t, then I would have probably behaved like most of the population.

“And if public opinion claimed this person had killed four witches and spread magical pollution, I’m sure I would have believed, just like everyone else,” she added.

“Because people accept the obvious explanations. That’s how humans are. I can’t go against my nature,” she continued defeatedly.

“Well, it’s best to hurry up and forget the sad memories. That’s how I’ve been living up until now. That’s how I’m so carefree.” Something about her face looked relieved. “Besides—while I was losing my memory constantly, I made so many people worry about me... I really owe them an apology. That’s why I wanted to go out into the world again, this time with my memories.”

“.....”

“After I do what I need to do, I should be able to search for a new hometown!”

“.....”

“By the way.” Avelia cut into the conversation from where she stood beside us, as I had remained silent. She had her cheeks extremely puffed out. “Big Sis, can I go with you, too?”

“Huh? Yep. I mean, it’ll be easier to travel with a broom.”

“...You’re mean.”

“...J-joking. I was kidding... Don’t get upset...”

A gloomy shadow fell over Avelia, and Amnesia started to panic.

I had a hunch that these two were headed for some interesting adventures.

I was sure that no matter what happened, they would be fine as long as they were together.

“...Hey, Elaina?” Suddenly, Amnesia turned toward me. “What are you going

to do now?"

"I'll continue my travels."

I am a traveler, after all.

"...Then this is good-bye, isn't it?"

"....."

I didn't answer her.

She didn't wait for me.

"Hey, Elaina. I'm going to find a new hometown, and when I do, I'll write to you. Will you come visit me? I'm definitely going to live in an amazing place and have a spectacular life that will make you terribly jealous."

And then she said, "So this is good-bye until then."

This doesn't mean we'll never see each other again. I won't feel lonely, because we're going to meet again.

I could almost hear her saying that...or maybe that's what I wanted to hear.

"...Okay." I nodded.

"....."

"....."

Those few seconds of silence felt like an eternity. We stared at each other for a long, long time as a gentle breeze brushed against our cheeks, urging us on.

It was time for us to part.

"....." Amnesia let out a little giggle at this point. She seemed just a little bit embarrassed. "If we're going our separate ways, this would be the part where I would give you some kind of gift, I suppose."

"...I don't really need anything."

My tone was probably a little sharper than I intended.

"I'm sorry. I don't have anything to give right now."

She embraced me.

She squeezed, as if to remember how I feel, and wrapped her arms around my back, hugging me very tightly.

“...This again?”

“Do you dislike it?”

“...Not particularly.”

Oh, fine. I wrapped my own arms around her back, as if I had no choice. When I cast a quick glance past Amnesia, I saw Avelia grumbling to herself. “...No fair.”

What’s not fair?

Amnesia must have heard Avelia, because she let out a quiet chuckle. “Thank you for believing in me when no one else did,” she said. “Thank you for coming with me this far.”

“Sure,” I replied.

Don’t worry about it.

“Thank you for saving me.”

“...Sure.”

“Thank you for being my friend.”

“.....Sure.”

“I love you.”

“Su—Huh?”

What did she just say?

While I was lost in confusion, she pulled away from me and turned her back. “Well, I should get going.”

I could see her bright red ears between the strands of her beautiful white hair.

I’m sure my chest was hot because of her lingering body heat. I’m sure my face was hot because of her warm breath.

“Hey, Elaina?” She spoke with her back still turned to me. Her voice trembled ever so slightly. “I’ll never forget you, okay?”

I turned my back on her as I answered.

“I won’t forget either. I promise.”

A wispy cloud floating in the air seemed to follow the road creeping along the ground below. The path was surrounded by a meadow covered in wildflowers, and a cool breeze blew through them, sending the blossoms bobbing. In the distance, we could see a small river flowing at the same relaxed pace as us. The scene was permeated by the crisp lapping of water.

And we went slowly forward.

Each on our own journey.



Afterword

A certain day in March, I get a phone call from my editor, M.

“Jougi, listen, we published *Riviere*, right? (Note: That’s an abbreviation for *Riviere and the Nation of the Prayer*. A series launched by GA Novels starting March 15, 2017. Illustrated by Azure, it’s being published as the official sequel to *Wandering Witch*. Elaina makes an appearance! Buy it, okay?) *Wandering Witch* is selling well thanks to that. It’s a longtime bestseller. And we’re going to do a second printing of all the volumes. How about a fourth book?”

I cried. *Huh? I can put out a fourth volume? Really?! A longtime bestseller? Seriously?*

This was all thanks to continued reprints taking place over about a year, and thanks to getting additional printings approved for all the volumes. In short, it’s thanks to everyone who bought the books even though a bit of time has passed since they first went on sale. Since the usual two pages wouldn’t be nearly enough to tell you how happy I am to be writing the afterword to the fourth volume, this time I asked a big favor of the editing staff to increase the length of the afterword.

And to that end, I’ll properly introduce myself. Jougi Shiraishi. Nice to meet you. It’s been a while.

More than half a year has passed since we published Volume 3, huh? All sorts of things have happened. Though the more I try to think of a concrete example of something that happened, the harder a time I have remembering. In regard to this series, I feel like only happy things have happened, since we got second editions printed and made the ranking in the magazine called *This Light Novel Is Amazing!* But since most of that happened after they decided to cancel this series, I was beset by an unshakeable sadness. It was really frustrating to not be able to continue it, even though I wanted to. But as I told you at the start of this afterword, we’re now at the stage where we can resume operations, thanks to

Riviere. I'm as grateful as can be. I feel as if a wish I've been making for a long time has come true. But since I don't want this series to end again, I'm going to work even harder than before.

Volume 4 took the passage of time and lapse of memory as its major themes. I feel like I always write this, but this time, the book turned out especially long. To the point where I thought Amnesia's story alone could probably fill a whole light novel on its own.

I think the inspiration for writing a story like Amnesia's came out of not wanting my readers to forget about Elaina's journeys to date. I probably should have made good on all the obvious foreshadowing that was in the previous volumes, but Amnesia's story was the one I wanted to write, so this is how the composition of this book turned out. I tried my best, and it turned out to be the longest story in the series. I never thought it would get so lengthy...

I'm sure you've noticed, however, that this book has the fewest total stories and the lowest page count so far. This is barely an excuse, but I had to write it in a hurry because the fourth volume happened unexpectedly after we published *Riviere*. I admire the authors who can maintain this kind of pace... There were no extensions to be had this time, so I did nothing but write. I was rusty after a long time not writing, and I ended up repeatedly throwing away my drafts. But it was fun. It felt like I got back to basics. Back when I was writing for Kindle, I spent my days writing and throwing away material for my books...and doing so earnestly. Since becoming a full member of society, I've been too busy, and it feels like I've forgotten something important.

By the way, in this extra-long afterword, I'm going to make comments about each chapter with spoilers. If you're one of the people who reads the afterword and looks at the illustrations first, you should probably skip over the next few pages.

• Chapter 1: City of Oblivion

I wrote this one to go with the all too incredible cover art by Azure. When we met up, Azure told me that "the cover is going to have some crumbling ruins," and I was like, "Score! Let's do a dark story!" and wrote a most depressing tale, but in the final drawing, the ruins looked

way too inviting, so I tossed that story in the garbage.

- **Chapter 2: A Fictional Witch**

I really don't understand coffee. What do they mean by "rich flavor"? What do they mean by "acidity"? I only understand the difference between drip coffee and canned coffee. In fact, I'm writing this in the afternoon on a day off while sipping a can of coffee.

- **Chapter 3: Likes and Dislikes**

I revised the story in this chapter from a special edition bonus story. When I thought about it, Saya had an extremely limited role in Volume 4, so I forced her in there. By the way, I also hate mushrooms. I mean, they're fungus!

- **Chapter 4: The Apple Murders**

I tried my hand at writing a detective story based on the Grimm brothers' "Snow White." Making the prince a necrophile was a nod to the original work. The prince is the creep. Oh yeah, this volume has too much puke in it.

- **Chapter 5: Trivial Stories**

Trivial stories where I just used wordplay to harass some characters. Elaina being mean, basically.

- **Chapter 6: The Sunken City**

They say those who cannot adapt to their circumstances will be left behind by the times and perish. It has been the same since before antiquity. If someone can adapt even to harsh circumstances, then I suppose they can get along pleasantly in their own way.

- **Chapter 7: Amnesia's Forgotten Travelogue**

This is the story in which we meet Amnesia. Elaina says that she's interested in the Holy City, Esto, but in reality she can't help but be curious about Amnesia. I digress, but the name *Amnesia* is a pun, a word that means "forgetful" in Greek. Why Greek? Because it's cool.

- **Chapter 8: The Hero, the Dragon, and the Sacrifice**

This was the last story I wrote for Volume 4. It came to be because once the manuscript was all assembled, I realized that all the stories about Amnesia were too serious. I digress, but if you picked up on the meaning of the guest book in the inn, you are an adult.

- **Chapter 9: A City on Ice**

A serious episode in which the broom makes a surprise second appearance. I think that Amnesia and Rudela were the same in that they couldn't make forward progress unless they made a very painful decision.

- **Chapter 10: Amnesia's Forgotten Homecoming**

As for the final chapter of the volume marking the new start of this series, I originally conceived of it as a standalone story. I hope you can appreciate the changes I made to fit it in as part of a larger book. Caught in a loop of repeating the same day over and over, Amnesia can finally look forward. Since all my stories related to memory were completely hopeless, I thought it might be nice to have one that was a little more positive, and this is what came of it. When I went to write it down, it ended up being ridiculously long. I digress, but the name *Avelia* is a pun, a word that means "tomorrow" in Greek. Why Greek? Because it's cool.

Those were my comments for each story. This is supplemental information: Amnesia's hair is white because Azure draws the cutest girls with white hair. I can't even express it in words. We had saved them up as a secret weapon for a special occasion. When it was decided that the series would end with the third volume, I was apprehensive because we were going to end the books without revealing our biggest secret! I'm glad we could release this volume. Seriously. No, really, I'm serious.

All right then, the acknowledgments.

To Azure:

Thank you as always for your cute illustrations! Amnesia is too cute. Elaina's new clothes are too cute. After I spoke with you at the awards ceremony, I watched *Attack on Titan*, and I bought every volume of the original work. I think that Hiroyuki Sawano is a god.

To M, my editor:

Thank you for all you do. Sorry for being unreasonable and writing such a long afterword. But if there is a fifth volume, I think I'll want to write a long one again. You always have an incredibly blunt attitude in your emails, but when you praise my manuscripts, I do a little jig, gripping my smartphone tightly. You're such a tease.

And to everyone who purchased this book:

Thank you very much! I can't contain my joy at being able to write another volume. I'm going to work even harder to ensure it doesn't end at four volumes. Thank you for your support.

All right then, I'd like to wrap up my afterword with my sincere hope that we can meet again in the next volume. See ya!

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